

1996

# Saints

Maximillian Gill  
*San Jose State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd\\_theses](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Gill, Maximillian, "Saints" (1996). *Master's Theses*. 1368.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.hxms-5krs>  
[https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd\\_theses/1368](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/1368)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

## **INFORMATION TO USERS**

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

# **UMI**

A Bell & Howell Information Company  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA  
313/761-4700 800/521-0600



**SAINTS**

**A Creative Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of English**

**San Jose State University**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**by**

**Maximillian Gill**

**December 1996**

**Faculty Adviser:**

**Dr. John Pollock**

**UMI Number: 1382572**

**Copyright 1996 by  
Gill, Maximillian**

**All rights reserved.**

---

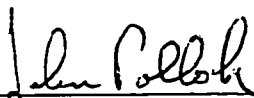
**UMI Microform 1382572  
Copyright 1997, by UMI Company. All rights reserved.**

**This microform edition is protected against unauthorized  
copying under Title 17, United States Code.**

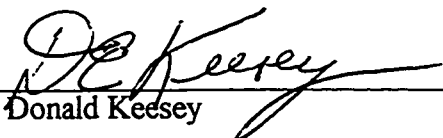
---

**UMI**  
**300 North Zeeb Road**  
**Ann Arbor, MI 48103**

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. John Pollock

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Nils Peterson

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Donald Keesey

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

  
\_\_\_\_\_

©1996

Maximillian Gill

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## ABSTRACT

### SAINTS

By Maximillian Gill

This thesis is a collection of poems based on biographies of Catholic saints recorded in Alban Butler's The Lives of the Saints. The poems use a similar form consisting of a blend of free verse and prose, and all of them address spiritual questions by retelling the stories of saints as if they took place in the twentieth century. The critical introduction analyzes the poems in terms of subject-object relationships manifested in mysticism, lunacy, eroticism, and poetry. The analysis refers to similar appearances of subject-object union in the writings of the mystics as well as in select poems by John Donne, George Herbert, William Blake, T. S. Eliot, and Anne Sexton, and the introduction concludes that the striving for such union is fundamental to human experience.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my advisors,  
particularly Dr. John Pollock for his thorough criticism and encouragement,  
also Dr. Donald Keeseey and Prof. Nils Peterson.

To past writing teachers, Dr. Virginia de Araujo and Dr. Robert Sweet,  
for helping my development as a writer.

To friends who offered advice on the work in progress,

Bret Keeling and Gene Paré.

To Shannon Goecke, Teresa Hernández, and my family, for love and support.

To my friends and roommates, Hector Ramos, Dan Unite and Tawni Unite,  
for tolerating a writer and his obsessions.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: Mysticism and Metaphor . . . . .	viii
Conversion	
St. Genesius the Comedian . . . . .	2
St. Mary of Egypt . . . . .	3
St. Barontius . . . . .	5
St. John Gualbert . . . . .	7
St. Dorothy . . . . .	8
Ss. Vitus and Modestus . . . . .	9
St. Amator . . . . .	11
St. Clare . . . . .	13
St. Colette . . . . .	14
St. Theodora . . . . .	15
St. Christopher . . . . .	17
St. Barbara . . . . .	19
Suffering	
St. Anastasius the Persian . . . . .	22
St. Theodosia . . . . .	24
The Nagasaki Martyrs . . . . .	25
St. Gummarus . . . . .	26
St. Eutropius . . . . .	28
St. Rita . . . . .	29
St. Thalelaeus the Hermit . . . . .	30
St. Antony, Part I . . . . .	31
The Martyrs of North America . . . . .	33
St. Humphrey . . . . .	36
St. Clarus . . . . .	38
St. Mary Francis . . . . .	39
St. Bernadette . . . . .	41
St. Theophilus the Penitent . . . . .	43
St. Cecilia . . . . .	45

St. Solangia . . . . .	. 46
St. John the Silent . . . . .	. 47
Acceptance	
St. Sergius . . . . .	. 49
St. Gregory the Wonderworker . . . . .	. 51
St. Elizabeth . . . . .	. 53
St. Mariana of Quito . . . . .	. 55
St. Teresa . . . . .	. 57
St. Benedict the Black . . . . .	. 59
St. Keyne . . . . .	. 61
St. Paul the Hermit . . . . .	. 63
St. Antony, Part II . . . . .	. 65
Appendix . . . . .	. 67

## Introduction: Mysticism and Metaphor

The fact that metaphor is a basic device in poetry is fairly self-evident, but the idea of metaphor as a foundation of other human experiences, as Northrop Frye claims, is perhaps a bit striking at first. Frye explains that because of a metaphor's "statement of identity of the type 'A is B,'" "literature always assumes, in its metaphors, a relation between human consciousness and its natural environment that passes beyond--in fact, outrages and violates--the ordinary common sense based on a permanent separation of subject and object" (Words 71). He goes on to allude to A Midsummer Night's Dream for an identification of three categories of human being, "The lunatic, the lover and the poet" (5.1.7), whom the rational character Theseus decries for being "of imagination all compact" (5.1.8) or for being people who, in Frye's terms, "take metaphor, or identity-with, seriously" (Words 78).

As I began to examine my poems about the saints, I realized that in many ways they exemplified, through both content and form, the union of subject and object as explained by Frye. Thus, Theseus's breakdown of these categories and Frye's gloss of them provide an excellent framework for a discussion of this collection, and I will demonstrate that my poems present the essential human desire to unite subject and object, or individual consciousness and external world, through the means of mysticism, lunacy, love, and poetry. I will also describe the appearance of similar concepts in other literary works, especially the poems of John Donne, George Herbert, William Blake, T. S. Eliot, and Anne Sexton.

Although Frye includes the mystic under the category of the lunatic as just another of the "infinite varieties of madness" (Words 81), I will discuss this classification as a separate topic because it is a major focus for these poems. The mystic strives for, is indeed often defined by, the ability to see visions unavailable within the earthly realm.

These visions generally entail perceptions of unities invisible to the ordinary consciousness. The mystic's ultimate goal is the confounding of the separation between the Divine as object and the human soul as subject. However, at lower levels of vision, the perceiver does not personally experience union but does witness conjunctions and unities in the external world.

At this level, one finds visions that convert sinners like St. John Gualbert, who imagines a merging of his murdered brother, Christ, and the man he is about to slay. Gualbert is working towards an apprehension of the commonality of all suffering, which Spurgeon finds expressed in Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" (136):

Each outcry of the Hunted Hare  
A fibre from the Brain does tear  
A Skylark wounded in the wing  
A Cherubim does cease to sing. (13-16)

Thus, a man who had initially echoed Cain's refusal to be his brother's keeper recognizes the preciousness of all blood.

Similarly, St. Elizabeth's husband, the archetypal self-centered rich man who refuses to share his blessings with the rest of society, is granted a vision uniting the sick man lying on his bed with the suffering Christ. Both experiences result in a release from the captivity of the ego and force the characters to look beyond their private concerns to recognize the unity of humanity. To achieve this state, the ego must die "the death of the 'lower self' or a death to all our selfish, hedonistic attitudes and attachments and limited, contingent ways of relating to the world; a death which is simultaneously a rebirth into a new life of free and creative love for all things" (Green 45). T. S. Eliot expresses a similar idea in "The Dry Salvages":

But to apprehend

The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint--  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love. (200-4)

Certainly, a unity with Christ is a potent type of Christian vision because Jesus's role as the one who gave His life to expiate all sin and to redeem all suffering represents the ultimate freedom from egocentric concerns.

St. Anastasius also glimpses the unity of suffering when his imagination merges painted images of the martyred St. Sebastian with a childhood memory of an old Christian man to create a solid figure out of the abstract concept of sacrifice. Anastasius, however, accomplishes a somewhat higher level of union because he seeks to bridge the distance between himself and the vision that floats before him in his cell by forming an identity with the martyr archetype. He achieves his goal to some extent, but his final regret demonstrates awareness that the identification is incomplete, and a gap still exists between him and his ideal of suffering. As we shall see, the recognition of this distance between subject and object is the greatest source of the mystic's despair.

The accomplishment of identity with divine substance is, of course, the next level of vision. Here we can locate St. Dorothy, who feels her soul separated from her body to such a degree that she perceives her own execution in a fragmented, detached sense. After descent from the Paradisaical Garden, she achieves an identity with the fruit of Heaven that imitates the transubstantiation of Christ into bread and wine.

An even higher identity joins the mystic with Christ. The hagiographies are filled with accounts of the miraculous appearances of Christ's wounds on saints' bodies. St. Colette envisions herself as bearing a cross on a highway which is both the literal road she traverses on her long journey and a representation of eternity, a symbol Wordsworth

employs in the Prelude (Spurgeon 67). Colette's willingness to engage in a suffering without end is a sufficient break from her aesthetic-minded and therefore ego-centered former self to compel the true Christ to break into her eternity and relieve her burden. St. Rita acts out the Christ-role by feeling the pain of the crown of thorns. Her suffering is of a different sort in that it seems purposeless; she is subjected to an abusive husband and an overzealous (to the point of sadistic) Mother Superior through no fault of her own ego, yet through these ordeals she understands what it is to suffer as Christ, and on her deathbed she is rewarded with a promise of resurrection in the form of a rose blooming from a dead stump.

St. Mary Francis feels an identity with the passions of Christ as she walks the Stations of the Cross. She takes it upon herself to pray for the souls in Purgatory and tries to bear the weight of the world's sins for the coming apocalypse. However, the identity collapses because she suffers a distance from her abusive father that the true Son, being of the same substance as the Father, does not experience. Once her sense of identity is lost, Mary Francis' mind fails and her prophecies seem nothing more than an externalization of her own fears of the collapse of her personal world.

St. Mariana of Quito follows the path of Christ to a more exacting specification. She participates in penitential rituals, her calling is revealed in the descent of the Holy Spirit, and in her final moments she realizes that she is to be the sacrifice for the sins of her city. Her acceptance of the nightmare death she had feared is the final act of release from ego, which here takes the form of instinct for self-preservation. A similar concept appears in Blake's Milton: "I will go down to self annihilation and eternal death / Lest the Last Judgment come and find me unannihilate / And I be seiz'd and giv'n into the hands of my own Selfhood" (14.22-24). Spurgeon finds that this passage illustrates the concept of "Imagination," by which "Blake would seem to mean all that we include under sympathy,

insight, idealism, and vision" (135), and which "entails of itself naturally and inevitably the Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice" (137). Thus, only through sacrifice can selfhood or egocentrism be conquered.

An even higher level of vision brings the mystic in close proximity to God. For medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, the "perfect knowledge of God" is attainable "through the activity of God within the depths of the soul" (Thomas 146). St. Augustine describes the union in similar terms: "And behold, You were within, while I was outside and sought You there; . . . You were within me but I was not with You" (qtd. in Thomas 93). Similarly, St. Barbara's conversion follows after the descent of the Holy Spirit and the apprehension of "the dancing of God within me" (11), and, in her visionary dream, St. Solangia feels the gift of God's love as the presence of His grace entering and animating her dead body.

St. Paul the Hermit perceives a similar operation of the Word inside him. He exemplifies the ideal of the ascetic mystic, who accomplishes a state of detachment from the world by renunciation of bodily needs and desires. Eckhart speaks of detachment as the primary method of mystic union; the soul must be absolutely still and passive because it cannot contribute to the speaking of God's word, but at the point of stillness, "God is bound to give himself to a heart detached" (qtd. in Thomas 150). Naturally, this detachment also entails a renunciation of the ego, which is no longer allowed to voice its own desires but only stays passive before the entrance of divine grace.

Some philosophers go on to establish the absolute pinnacle of subject-object union as a monistic merging of man and God to such an extent that the individual identities are no longer distinguishable; others criticize mysticism as heretical on these grounds. However, the mystic St. Bernard of Clairvaux claims that union with God is not identity with God;



that is, the harmony of wills between the soul and God does not imply a unity of mortal substance with God's substance (Jantzen 156). Such a union can result in a merging of perspectives so that the mystic can know reality as God experiences it, and this type of vision is the highest achievement I grant the saints in this collection. St. Solangia, for example, perceives her body from outside and understands the entrance of God's love from the higher perspective, but the story of St. Benedict the Black allows an even better illustration of the concept.

Benedict initially functions on a lower level of subject-object union as he is able to see through the perspectives of other human beings. However, this miraculous power has its drawbacks. At this point, I should mention that Frye conceives of the spectrum of subject-object relationships as a ladder just as I have been discussing it as a series of levels, and, whereas an ascent on the "visionary ladder" gradually closes the distance between subject and object, a descent "would take us into a world where subject and object grow steadily apart" (Words 87). Benedict realizes that because of his black skin, he is perceived by others as an object in the most dehumanizing sense of the word, "a field of black, unchanging and formless, no face, no eyes, no light within" (17-18), "a black disc" (19), and "an inkblot with black spikes" (32). If the journey up the ladder brings one closer to Heaven, then the descending journey takes one into the proximity of Hell. For example, St. Barontius sees Hell as a place where the separation of subject and object is manifested in the isolation of human beings who must ignore the suffering of others just to avoid the pain themselves. Spurgeon finds the same suggestion in Blake: "the universe as we know it is the result of the fall of the one life from unity into division" (133). For Benedict, the fallen state is a hell of isolation caused by the objectifying evils of racism.

However, Benedict's pain is redeemed at the moment of greatest despair, and he receives a gift of vision that unites his perception with God's and allows him to see unity in

images of ocean and flame. This moment is the mystic's greatest achievement, "an intuitive or experienced conviction of unity, of oneness, of likeness in all things" (Spurgeon 3). The concept seems to be fundamental to all intense religious experience. The Bhagavad-Gita counsels, "There is true knowledge. Learn thou it is this: / To see one changeless Life in all the Lives, / And in the Separate, One Inseparable" (qtd. in Spurgeon 3), and techniques of Zen Buddhism strive for "absorption in total unity of being, absorption to the point where there is no longer any subjective feeling" (Cleary 19).

In the English literary tradition, Coleridge's Religious Musings indicates a belief in "one omnipresent Mind" and proposes that the greatest human achievement is "to know ourselves / Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole!" (qtd. in Spurgeon 103-4), and Tennyson's "Ancient Sage" speaks of "the feeling of the unity of all existence to the point of merging the personality into the universal" (Spurgeon 87), using a metaphor very similar to St. Benedict's vision of all existence as a single ocean:

But that one ripple on the boundless deep  
Feels that the deep is boundless, and itself  
For ever changing form, but evermore  
One with the boundless motion of the deep. (qtd. in Spurgeon 87)

Bodelson locates the apprehension of unity in the mysticism of T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" as the experience of:

a higher reality, where happiness has a completeness which ordinary life does not offer; where reality is grasped as a oneness, and not fragmentarily as in our ordinary existence; and where the horror of evil and suffering is resolved because it is seen to be only a fragment of the whole. (49)

Certainly, in St. Benedict's case the vision of unity aids his reconciliation with the devil of racism he has feared all his life, and he can emerge from the vision in laughter. The same

idea appears in a number of texts as different as God's answer to Job and Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man": humans cannot truly condemn the presence of evil in the universe unless they are able to see the grand plan as God does.

St. Antony's final statement is also an understanding of God's perspective but operates in a different manner. Instead of submerging human suffering by seeing through God's eyes as Benedict does, Antony raises suffering to the divine level, thus bridging the subject-object gap by bringing God to earth rather than leaving earth to ascend to God. Brooding on the death of his dear friend St. Paul, Antony realizes that his loss is nothing compared to the pain of God who "knows the absence of billions of souls" (67). One of the precepts of mysticism is that God longs for contact with human souls as much as human souls long for Him; indeed, Meister Eckhart claims that "He longs for thee a thousand-fold more urgently than thou for him" (qtd. in Thomas 151). Donne echoes this sentiment when he envisions God as a magnet pulling the human soul: "thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart" (Holy Sonnets I, 14), and George Herbert expresses God's "daily and immediate love seeking out with particular yearning the last of its creatures" (White 181) in "Easter":

I got me flowers to straw thy way;  
I got me boughs off many a tree:  
But thou wast up by break of day,  
And brought'st thy sweets along with thee. (19-22)

In Anne Sexton's "Not so. Not so.," the link with humanity is God's single wish: "God is not indifferent to your need. / You have a thousand prayers / but God has one" (25-7). Ultimately, no matter how much joy the mystic moment imparts, sorrow is an inevitable component, and every union is followed by a separation, what Spurgeon describes as "that particular state of depression and stagnation which often follows on

great exaltation, and to which the religious mystics have given the name of the 'dark night of the soul'" (105). I deliberately end these poems with Antony's remarks to show both the ultimate identification with divine knowledge and the pain of division, for as human beings we are creatures of the physical world, and no matter how high we reach into the spiritual, we always return to the fallen world of disunity.

The lunatic is the second category of people who take the identity metaphor seriously. Frye discusses the mystic and the lunatic as a single type, and indeed, from the modern perspective, the mystic visions claimed by the saints do seem like hallucinations of schizophrenic minds. However, the lunatic's subject-object identity seems to operate in the opposite direction; whereas the mystic admits contact with an external presence, the lunatic charges the external environment with aspects of his internal consciousness, and subject and object are united because subject manifests itself as object. Here reside those whose personal fears and pains appear as visions of, in Theseus's words, "more devils than vast hell can hold" (5.1.9). Thus, in Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan recognizes that the Devil before him is really just a part of himself: "You are an hallucination. You are the incarnation of myself, but only of one side of me . . . [sic] of my thoughts and feelings, but only the worst and most stupid of them" (578; bk. 9, ch. 9).

Similarly, St. Antony projects his sexual shame by fashioning a prostitute into an incarnation of the Devil, and he convinces himself that his nocturnal emissions are a result of the Devil's attack. St. Keyne's anxieties stemming from childhood fears of her industrial coal-mining environment take the form of snakes and the Devil emerging out of a coal-pit. Of course, as Frye explicitly recognizes, the separation between lunatic and mystic is vague at best, especially in our rational age in which the mystic is often by definition a lunatic. In fact, the distinctions are blurred between all of the subject-object categories.

The border between the mystic and the lover is particularly indistinct. Lovers

attempt the union of subject and object in the sex act, which unites two physical beings in what the Biblical metaphor of Genesis 2:24 calls "one flesh" (Frye, Words 78). Parallels between sexual and religious union abound in every sort of religious writing. In the Bible, Christ is symbolically the male bridegroom whereas the Church comprises the female bride (Frye, Great 154). Kierkegaard has written of the relationship between God and man as one between lovers: "What is necessary, in fact, is not to read the Bible as a critic and a savant, as an admirer and a connoisseur, but to read it 'before God,' as a man will read a letter from his betrothed" (Jolivet 99). In George Herbert's mystic poem "Love (III)," the character of Divine Love appears as a woman inviting a man into her chamber. The sexual double meanings are unmistakable in the phrases "observing me grow slack" (3) and "You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat" (17).

The parallels are particularly striking in writings by the mystics. St. Hildegard's poem "Song of the Virgins" presents Christ as a virile figure, "You, the prepotent lion broke through the heavens / descending into the chamber of the Virgin," and evinces an urge for Christ that borders on sexual desire:

O most sweet savour of desirable delight!  
We ever sigh after you  
in fearful exile,  
when will we see you and dwell with you? (qtd. In Flanagan 119)

St. John of the Cross envisions a merging of mystic with God as a union of lover and bride: "Oh night that joined the lover / To the beloved bride / Transfiguring them each into the other" (13), and the writings of St. Teresa of Avila provide a rather famous example of Freudian sexual imagery in a religious testament:

In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that

it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God.  
(qtd. in Green 45)

Richard Crashaw's poem "A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Sainte Teresa" covers similar ground and uses the language of orgasm to describe the Saint's mystical experience:

O how oft shalt thou complain  
Of a sweet and subtle Pain,  
Of intolerable Ioyes;  
Of a Death, in which who dyes  
Loves his death, and dyes again.  
And would forever so be slain. (97-102)

Sex is the ultimate union of two beings in the physical realm just as the mystic moment is the ultimate union in the spiritual realm, and the parallels between the two suggest both that physical union is used as a substitute for spiritual union and that the desire for mystic union is a sublimation of sexual desire. St. Antony's experience demonstrates both concepts. First, he describes a sexual tryst in Biblical terms: the Holy Trinity is transformed into a sexual trinity of "the boy," "the man," and "the pumping blood" (26-27), and the Eucharist image of blood as life is altered into "the hand is life" (27); thus, the abstract spiritual trinity is replaced with an expression of paradoxical erotic attractions united in one figure, and the promise of eternal life with sacrificial blood is superseded by the promise of sexual ecstasy with use of a physical limb. Antony takes Duke Theseus's complaint, "The lover, all as frantic, / Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt" (5.1.10-11), one step further by seeing God in the hand of a prostitute. However, befitting his stature as a good Christian saint, Antony rejects these displacements and

resists sexual temptation until his desires are sublimated into an experience of the physical presence of Christ which is still charged with sensual implications.

In a sense, we must resort to sexual metaphors for describing mystical experiences because as beings accustomed to a physical world we cannot otherwise articulate a contact of pure spirit. Thus, St. Mary of Egypt, the archetypal reformed prostitute who has only known the physical component of love, conceives of God as a potential lover who never arrives. Of course, the ecstasy of the sexual union is as fleeting as that of the mystical union; Frye notes, "When the union in one flesh does take place, there is still frustration, this time inherent in the brevity . . . and above all in the inability to forget that two people never really become one person" (Words 79). Anne Sexton's poem "When Man Enters Woman" captures both the mystical aspect of sex and the sense of absence that follows:

This man,  
this woman  
with their double hunger,  
have tried to reach through  
the curtain of God  
and briefly they have,  
though God  
in His perversity  
unties the knot. (19-27)

St. Mary's story begins with her awareness of the emptiness of the post-coital moment: "The after-feel of sheets going cold and an opening of gray in the sky through windows were my silence, my empty moments, my naked absence of touch" (6-7).

The opposite, or, as Frye would put it, the demonic parody of a spiritual sexual union

is a forced sexual consummation driven by the desire to conquer and subdue. St. Solangia comes to learn of this type of union as "the Devil's love" when a man tries to rape her, and the visions that compel St. John the Silent to muteness include dreams of raping Christ. Such experiences of sex in its most violent form are descents along the subject-object continuum to a hell-world where one subject exerts its ego to the point where the other in the act is reduced to the status of object, what current parlance appropriately refers to as sexual objectification.

The highest level of sexual union is, of course, sex fused with genuine love, often exalted until it becomes a spiritual intermingling of souls as in Donne's "The Extasie": "Love, these mixt soules, doth mixe againe, / And makes both one, each this and that" (35-6). Such an earthly love is another metaphor for the Divine Love experienced by the mystic. Jantzen notes:

It is no accident that Bernard, in company with many others in the Christian mystical tradition, uses erotic imagery to depict mystical union: the merging of wills and affections in loving sexual encounter is enhanced, not undermined, by the strength of personhood of each participant, and each bring their full selves to the partnership and are cherished by it. (158)

In the case of Dante, the Vita Nuova "shows how his love for her [Beatrice] became the guide to the fruition of the Divine" (Gardner 6). Thus, we reach what Gardner calls "the special theme of the mystics" (11), and what St. Bonaventura terms "the stretching out of the soul into God by the desire of love" (qtd. in Gardner 11). St. Antony's journey through displacement, temptation and sublimation ends at this point when he unites a sexual touch and his love for St. Paul with his love for God.

Finally, we reach the realm of the poet, who attempts a fusion of subject and object by taking internal thoughts and emotions, grafting them upon images of the external



world, and producing a resultant artifact. Albert Beguin seems to express something of this sort: "At the height of the poetic experience the frontiers between an exterior and an interior world disappear; all is image, offered to the free disposition of a spirit which recomposes according to its own wish the order of everything given." Once the poet reaches this height, continues Beguin, he or she is in the presence of something other than his or her own being: "the spirit ceases to consider itself as the author of the song in which it finds its felicity; it seems to perceive a voice which is no longer its own. That which speaks is not itself but another who stirs in the depths" (emphasis in original) (qtd. in Maritain, "Magic" 30-1). At this point, poetry tends to resemble a religious experience: "Poetry is the fruit of contact of the spirit with reality, which is in itself ineffable, and with the source of reality, which we believe to be God himself in that movement of love which causes him to create images of his beauty" (Maritain, "Sense" 21). In Theseus's terms, "The poet's eye . . . / Doth glance from heaven to earth" (5.1.12-3), taking in the whole of reality, which is combined with the imagination to give "to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (5.1.16-7).

Indeed, the parallels between poetry and mysticism are abundant. Beguin notes, "Call to unity--descent into the regions where the self is renounced in favor of a presence which it perceives within itself--efficacious action of the image: one cannot help . . . noticing singular resemblances between these definitions and those which it is possible to give of the mystical experience" (qtd. in Maritain, "Magic" 31). Maritain herself indicates that both poetry and mysticism involve the quest for mystical unity and the communication of the experience:

the mystic also thirsts for unity and union: unity of all his faculties in peace, union of all his being with God. He too, he especially, frequents 'the road which goes toward the interior,' up to those mysterious sources where he finds a God

more intimate to him than himself. He also feels the need of images, in the meditation which precedes contemplation. And when he finds himself again among us, it is rare that he does not, under the pressure of the abundance of his riches, experience the need of using song and the spoken word to try to communicate the ineffable, to announce to all the presence of God and his goodness. ("Magic" 31-2)

Parallels also link the poet and the lover. Frye notes that for a love poet like Donne, "the experience of being one flesh, identical with someone else, supplied the generative power for his poetry. . . . Thus love poetry, and perhaps all poetry, is the child of the frustration of identity, a presence taking the place of or substituting for an enforced absence" (Words 79). According to Frye, Donne makes a metaphor out of the parallel in "The Extasie" and "The Canonization," indicating "a connection in Donne's mind between the sex act and the writing of poetry" (79).

Because my characters deal with the subject-object union in diverse ways, I have used various techniques to underscore the relationship. One characteristic of my poems is the placement of the saints' stories into twentieth-century contexts. The displacement forces a certain isolation upon the characters. For one thing, our modern age is the most secular period the Christian world has experienced; thus, someone as religiously devoted as a saint undergoes a greater gap between his beliefs and those of the society around him. For example, unlike the saints upon whom they are patterned, my St. Theophilus finds no refuge within a thoroughly corrupt church, my St. Thalelaeus becomes a street person passed by and abused by society, and my St. Theodosia's crime occurs in modern America instead of in pagan Rome. Also, the modern era of literature is unique in that much of it centers upon the problem of alienation of characters in society. I consider my poems a part of this tradition; therefore, most of this collection features characters isolated because

of psychological problems or religious views. Their world is the modern hell in which subject and object have grown apart and have left them with no hope but faith in God.

I also use form to unify subject and object in my poems. The verse portions include direct quotations from Butler's Lives of the Saints, a technique which alludes to the hagiographic tradition and reinforces the sense that my poems are modern versions of saint biography. However, because these lines are differentiated by italicization, traditional diction, and narrative content but are nevertheless smoothly integrated into the poems and advance the storylines, they also represent a melding of another writer's words as object and my own writing as subject.

The form of my poems is designed to demonstrate the dichotomy of subject and object at the same time it represents the melding of the two, which both achieves the sort of paradox that Cleanth Brooks claims is "the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry" (3) and serves as an analogue to the paradoxical fusion of time and eternity of the mystic moment. The poetic verse-paragraphs represent the subjective voice, my conception of myself as detached observer watching and recording the actions of these characters according to a personal poetic sense. However, in the prose paragraphs I attempt to adopt the voice of the object and allow the saints themselves to tell their stories. The verse portions are composed with a consciousness of rhythm and line breaks, but I try to maintain at least the illusion of a lack of conscious control in the prose portions by allowing them to run on without line breaks. Whereas the italicized quotations are weaved into the text to establish a link between subject and object, the shift between blocks of verse and prose is more drastic in order to contrast subject and object.

Allowing another voice to speak through one's pen is the basis of much literature. A major part of the process is the release of ego just as the mystic must be rid of ego in order to unite with another identity; T. S. Eliot seems to refer to this process when he

discusses "[t]he progress of an artist" as "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (28). Frye contends that at its highest level, the poetic experience admits "a feeling of actual communication with a personal but not subjective presence" (Words 76). However, the voice of the mystic in the midst of vision is very specialized, and in writing these poems I had to determine how a poet who has never had a mystic revelation can create visions by utilizing poetic techniques rather than personal mystic experience. Some of the specific techniques I used in creating these poems are as follows.

Because the moment of vision often involves distortions of ordinary reality, I have found that unusual juxtapositions, absences of logical connections, and surreal images are useful tools for constructing other-worldly and ambiguous visions such as water swimming around angels in St. Genesius's vision instead of the angels swimming in the water. St. Mary of Egypt's sinful life is glimpsed within "a stripe of neon red" (27), and mysteries of the rosary merge with scenes of children playing on a carousel in St. Bernadette's vision. Certainly, these associations are not formed with a great deal of deliberation, and I would hope that, in Frye's terms, I am working with a "creative verbal power [that] is associated with something in the mind supplementary to ordinary consciousness" (Words 52). As for the efficacy of this power for imitating mystical experiences, I am comforted by Maritain's contention that "[t]he principal cause of the obscurity which goes to the point of non-sense is truly, even if the poet is an atheist, of a quality which it is impossible not to call religious" ("Sense" 9).

Symbolism is another fundamental technique in poetry which also has its function in mysticism. Spurgeon notes that "symbolism and mythology are, as it were, the language of the mystic. This necessity for symbolism is an integral part of the belief in unity," and "by the aid of symbolism we are often enabled to catch a reflection of truth which we are not capable of apprehending in any other way" (9). Poetry is no different: "as the essence

of mysticism is to believe that everything we see and know is symbolic of something greater, mysticism is on one side the poetry of life. For poetry, also, consists in finding resemblances, and universalities the particulars with which it deals" (Spurgeon 12). Indeed, Gardner notes that symbolic language may be the only means of expression available to the mystic struggling to convey a vision:

When the mystic, whether saint or poet, has some high vision of the unseen, he can only communicate what he has seen or felt to his fellow-men by making use of symbolism and imagery: that is, he is compelled to give expression to what he has conceived or experienced of the eternal in the figurative language of a day.  
(37)

Accordingly, I have my saints communicate in a symbolic language with roots in Christian and Biblical imagery. Ss. Barontius and Mary Francis experience the mountain of purgatory, St. Amator sees his separation from his bride as an ocean parting similar to the parting of the Red Sea described in the Exodus miracle, St. Barbara witnesses the descent of the Holy Spirit and Christ walking upon water, St. Theophilus is visited by Mother Mary, St. Cecilia's husband is threatened by a sword-bearing angel like the one that guards Eden in Genesis, St. Humphrey meets a Christ figure leading a symbolic flock, St. Solangia dies on thorn-like barbed wire, and St. Mariana experiences the Holy Spirit in the figures of pigeons and a dove statue.

With regard to symbolism, I am also indebted to T. S. Eliot's description of the mystical experience in "Burnt Norton," which envisions the moment as "the still point of the turning world" (62). Bodelson describes the image as "outside time, and therefore also outside movement. While it lasts, it releases the mystic from the bondage of time" (49). I employ a similar symbol in "St. Bernadette," when the apparition of the Lady is stationary before a revolving carousel, and in "St. Christopher," in which the saint tries to evoke a

mystical moment by remaining still within the flow of a river.

Although I cannot gauge how effectively I have conveyed the mystical vision or have achieved the sort of subject-object union craved by the poet, the process of writing these poems has made me understand how vital such a union is to the human experience.

Religion, love, creativity--perhaps they all are forms of madness, yet they are also some of the most fundamental activities of the human spirit. I return to T. S. Eliot for validation on this point:

The life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them. (qtd. in Childs 111)

"Jarring and incompatible" are certainly appropriate words because the living out of a metaphor, whether by joining with a deity, another body, or a voice inside one's head, violates the boundaries we feel exist in the physical world. When we wander the forest of the imagination, nothing seems incompatible any longer; even love between a fairy queen and an ass-headed fool seems feasible. The Theseus' of the world may call imaginative visions "antique fables" or "fairy toys" (5.1.3), but the mystic knows the closeness of God, the lover understands how two hearts and bodies can cleave into one, and the poet continues to commit to art. When we experience the presence of an "other," we realize that we are not that alone after all, or at the very least that we are united in our feelings of aloneness. Ultimately, the striving for the subject-object union brings us closer into the human community. I end this collection with the second part of the story of St. Antony, whose personal journey best exemplifies the mystic's ordeal. After his trials, temptations, and mystic moments, Antony finds his way to the comforting lights of home.

## Works Cited

- Blake, William. The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake. Ed. David V. Erdman. New York: Anchor, 1982.
- Bodelson, C. A. T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets: A Commentary. 2nd ed. Copenhagen: Copenhagen UP, 1966.
- Brooks, Cleanth. The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry. Harcourt: New York, 1947.
- Childs, Donald J. "Risking Enchantment: The Middle Way between Mysticism and Pragmatism in Four Quartets." Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot's Four Quartets. Ed. Edward Lobb. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. 107-30.
- Cleary, Thomas. No Barrier: Unlocking the Zen Koan. New York: Bantam, 1993.
- Crashaw, Richard. "A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Sainte Teresa." The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse. 1917. Eds. D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee. Oxford: Clarendon, 1941. 40-5.
- Donne, John. The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne. Ed. Charles M. Coffin. New York: Modern Library, 1952.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. The Brothers Karamazov. Trans. Constance Garrett. New York: Signet, 1957.
- Eliot, T. S. Four Quartets. 1943. San Diego: Harvest, 1971.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Contemporary Literary Criticism. 2nd ed. Eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. New York: Longman, 1989. 26-31.
- Flanagan, Sabina. Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179: A Visionary Life. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Frye, Northrop. The Great Code: The Bible and Literature. New York: Harcourt, 1981.
- . Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature". San Diego: Harcourt, 1990.
- Gardner, Edmund G. Dante and the Mystics. 1913. New York: Haskell, 1968.
- Green, Deirdre. Gold in the Crucible: Teresa of Avila and the Western Mystical Tradition. Longmead, Great Britain: Element, 1989.
- Herbert, George. The English Poems of George Herbert. Ed. C. A. Patrides. London: Dent, 1974.
- Jantzen, Grace. "'Where Two are to Become One': Mysticism and Monism." The

Philosophy in Christianity. Ed. Godfrey Vesey. Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series 25. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. 147-66.

St. John of the Cross. The Poems of St. John of the Cross. Trans. Roy Campbell. New York: Grosset, 1967.

Jolivet, Régis. Introduction to Kierkegaard. Trans. W. H. Barber. New York: Dutton, 1946.

Maritain, Raissa. "Magic, Poetry, and Mysticism." The Situation of Poetry: Four Essays on the Relations Between Poetry, Mysticism, Magic, and Knowledge. Trans. Marshall Suther. New York: Philosophical Library, 1955. 23-36.

---. "Sense and Non-Sense in Poetry." The Situation of Poetry: Four Essays on the Relations Between Poetry, Mysticism, Magic, and Knowledge. Trans. Marshall Suther. New York: Philosophical Library, 1955. 1-22.

Sexton, Anne. The Awful Rowing Toward God. Boston: Houghton, 1975.

Shakespeare, William. A Midsummer Night's Dream. Ed. Wolfgang Clemen. New York: Signet, 1963.

Spurgeon, Caroline F. E. Mysticism in English Literature. 1913. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1970.

Thomas, George F. Religious Philosophies of the West. New York: Scribner's, 1965.

White, Helen C. The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience. 1936. New York: Macmillan, 1956.



I  
CONVERSION

### St. Genesisus the Comedian

"As a child I once stood before Your fallen face and pathetic shut eyes fashioned in sickly yellow wood. Your arms were long, inhuman things, stretched and hammered down. Something about the crown and oily red smears in your hair made me laugh. A pale dead king, a slack jaw, an empty moan, crying and crying in Your pain. I laughed, mother hit me, 'Quiet, quiet,' but I ran past the lacquered benches, sat outside on gravel and laughed hard into my lap."

Film cameras whir and fix  
on Genesisus, his practiced smirk and quick gestures  
to the other players.  
Applause signs in vivid red.  
*He took it into his head*  
*to burlesque the ceremonies of Christian baptism.*  
Genesisus falls to the stage and raises palm to forehead,  
snickers, "I am resolved to die a Christian."  
The actors prepare for mock-baptism,  
a rusted water-pail, an apron, a cardboard papal hat.

"I closed my eyes as the clown-pope lunged to toss the water. A splash of cold. Droplets caught on my lashes blurred my vision and I could see angels focused around angels hovering in swimming water. One with a rose blush on cheeks and chin dropped close to my face and opened a book etched with strange smiling masks on its cover. She listed off all the sins I had committed. I shuddered when she said, 'You laughed in church at the suffering of the Lord.' Then she put the book in the empty pail, lifted it, and fluttered her quick fingers through clean white pages."

Genesisus stands up to applause,  
dark studio rows with flashing heads and cheers.  
He blinks at the lights,  
the clown-pope laughs, his cheeks like blood-sores,  
his eyebrows like black chalk, "Do you feel saved?"  
*Genesisus then declared himself openly and seriously.*  
The audience laughs. Outstretched palms,  
dripping face, eyes searching for angels.  
"Bitterly do I regret that I once detested  
his holy name," he yells, while laughter  
gathers on laughter.

## St. Mary of Egypt

"My mother always kept me in a black wrap. In my room, I would unpeel the shroud from my face and feel the length of my hair on my neck and shoulders. I ran away, found a city of neon bulbs and cigarettes consumed in dim doorways. I learned about embraces of men. I followed them into cars, humid tents, and yellowed hotel rooms. Some cried in gratitude, some had hard gripping fingers, others bowed and kissed me, some spat and forgot how to speak. The after-feel of sheets going cold and an opening of gray in the sky through windows were my silence, my empty moments, my naked absence of touch into a sleep of my one in the wide bare space of clinging sheets."

Red fingernail, running down a gold chain  
to the cross.

"Where are you going, father?"

Bracelet rattle. Hair  
pushed back.

"To Jerusalem."

His glasses, silver rims, plucked.

"Come with me. My name is Mary."

In the corner,  
he bends his face into his palms.

She's stepping into her shoes.

The bus waits,  
engine rumble shakes windows.

*Curiosity led her to join a band of people  
who were going to celebrate at Jerusalem.*

"I walked in the line into the church, but at the steps I felt something like wings batting my face. I fell and pulled at the claws in my hair. A statue of the Virgin Mary painted in blue and white stood in the courtyard. When I looked at her face she showed me my life like a stripe of neon red notched with every moment my hips lurched against a lustful man. Black dust coated my knees as I crawled to the statue and pressed my hands to the long stone robe. "What must I do?"

*"Go over Jordan and thou shalt find rest."*

Dry stems, wrapped together with leaves  
to form crosses.

Always the same single face  
etched in dirt,

wiped by breeze and crafted again.

Kneeling naked in a marked-off circle,

she beats the ground,

chants, "Holy mother, Oh God, Holy mother,

Oh God my God . . ."

"I eat little and can't find water sometimes. Chopped meat and cups of wine were brought to my table once, but I know that God wants me here. He is the heat that strikes me in the morning and sends the tiny lizards scraping through the bushes for shade. At night when the desert floor cools I lie down nude and offer my love to Him. The wind blows cold

in the valley and raises shivers across my skin, and my back aches on the hard packed earth, but I still wait. "My God, I am pure love, I am willing, I am brought to You by Your servant, take me." He is a cold and distant lover, no touch to spare, no desire to enflame. I've never read His book or learned His ways. I am nothing but as the ground is to Him. Burn me in the day and douse me in the evening. Everything I've given, I give to You."

St. Barontius

Monastery beds are short, clean, white,  
thin sheets pressed firm, unfinished wood.  
"You've given everything away?"  
"Everything." When the abbot leaves, Barontius  
slips a gold watch under his pillow.  
At night, his head rolls limp on its side.  
*He fell into a state of coma which lasted many hours.*

"I awoke in darkness. Demons had slipped into my room, sinewy tight shapes blacker  
than the dark walls.

They slide under the bed, scrapes of claws hooking into the ceiling,  
faces burned in smooth fiendish masks.

I waited in the wet sheets clinging to my skin as  
they shifted and sniffed about the room. The closet was thrown open and clothes flew out  
in shreds. I heard claws rip into the mattress before they pulled my nightshirt off.

Bone  
talons across my leg, my stomach, my hand, acrid stench of poison, my blood is striping  
the sheets.

Lips like pliant stone locked on my mouth and blew in great puffs of fetid air,  
searing my throat and lungs. I choked. Tears stung my eyes. Somehow I could feel the  
words traced on my arm. 'You are ours.'

'Lord, please preserve me, how have I offended  
You?'

The room flashed with a white light, I saw the demons lurch back into the corners  
covering their eyes. Firm hands grasped and lifted me from the bed. The beating of wings  
was huge in my ears.

My clothes are whole. Thank God. My body has stopped bleeding.  
Thank God. I breathe air again. Thank God.

He set me down on a vast floor of tiles  
squared by thick white columns rising to a ceiling too high to see. I stood up and ran my  
fingers through cut grooves of polished marble. A figure in white stepped behind a  
column trailing the suggestion of wings. I followed and found nothing. A face looked out  
from behind another column and disappeared. A voice, 'Here you are judged.'

I wander, I  
don't know where I've walked, my feet leave no prints on the tiles, faces that are nowhere,  
footsteps that never sound. I smell demons here.

'Give him to us.' 'Yes, give him.' 'We  
have a right.' Like lizards they writhed around the columns in firm black outlines on  
immaculate white. Tongues flicked to form voices. 'He has sinned.' 'He is greedy.' 'He is  
worthless to you.'

'He has been forgiven.' I fall to my knees.

'Look!' said one. Something  
metal dropped on the floor. 'Look!' I ran and hid behind a column, but it was still before  
me. 'Give him up.'

'Forgive me, father, for I have sinned.'

'We take him.'

Floor has swung

away from me, no arms to hold. They circle, looping, waving long arms.

Where I floated  
the space was hideous dark with strands of red mist drifting about in long whorls.

Mist on  
my skin burns it to harsh black, pain marks, scream, kick.

I saw naked figures of men and  
women like animated ivory trying to flee the mist. One man became enveloped and he  
yelled and put out his hands but the others kept apart and turned away.

Burning vastness,  
devil grins. 'I know. I know.'

Flattened earth met me from below. I sat on a desert plain  
with nothing but a solitary mountain rising blue-gray in the distance. The Bible lay in the  
sand. When I started to read I understood what I had to do. Twigs emerged from the  
barren ground. I took one to copy verses in the sand in a straight line towards the  
mountain.

'Ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.' 'Ye cannot drink the cup  
of the Lord, and the cup of devils.' 'Nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God.'  
Here is my teaching, my second life, my way of grasping beyond sin."

A spittle trail has dried  
onto the pillow when Barontius awakes.  
Three brethren kneeling in prayers,  
window light a broad stripe across their hands.  
He pulls out the watch  
and drops it on the floor before them.

# St. John Gualbert

"I remember needing nothing but wine that morning. I sat cutting notches in the broken barrel cask in our yard when my father came out. 'Watch over him when he goes to town today. He has insulted a man he shouldn't have.' 'He's a fool,' I said. 'He's your brother.' I sat by him in his favorite cafe. He drank until he could laugh with the woman who had a flame stitched over her breast. I thought I knew the man in the corner, his thin moustache and dark gray scarf. In the small yard in the back I lit a cigarette and stared at a lone tree on a hilltop. A woman screamed before the butt-end stopped smoldering. I found my brother clutching his neck, trying to block the blood seeping out between his fingers."

John sleeps on a cot in his father's vineyard.  
Cigarettes emptied, thrown in the plow rows.  
He lights a cluster of dry vines and leaves,  
watches it shrivel to burnt-black.

"I will not return to my father's house  
until that murderer is dead."

Bus rides to other villages, whiskey  
and banknotes passed to grubby hands.  
*One day he came upon the murderer.*

"I clubbed him with a wood mallet. He fell unconscious in the runny gutter in the alley. I unwrapped his scarf and put the edge of my knife to his throat but looked away when I should have cut, looked and saw a man with spread arms on the alley's dead-end wall. 'Forgive them, Father,' he said. Then he was no more, only obscene words painted and scratched on the wall. The murderer's eyes were shut, I felt the blood matted in his hair, the moon's burning orange drifted across the gutter water, and I couldn't force the blade into the skin. I saw my brother crying for his running blood, the face against the word-wall, and a murderer waiting in his beating veins. When he awoke, he saw the knife on the ground. His eyes upon me, his eyes back to the knife, his fingers finding the handle, blade held to my neck. 'Do it if you find it so easy,' I said. 'I share his blood with you.' A fist in my mouth, a kick into my stomach, I collapsed in a dark pain spiral."

The monastery doors open at first light.  
A thin man in robe finds John  
on the steps, bruised skin, bleeding cuts,  
groans, an eye trying to open from its swelling.  
The man's hands, large and covering,  
wrapped around John's head. Another man helps  
to pull him inside the thick doors. The third  
pours a water bucket on the steps  
to splash away the pooled blood.

St. Dorothy

The courtroom has hard white walls  
and light floating in long strips.  
A guard pulls at the crook of her arm, she stands.  
*A young lawyer jeered at her and asked her  
to send him fruits from the garden to which she was going.*  
His tie pin a nub of smooth gold, his smile  
filled with teeth. A camera flashes,  
she waves at him and drops to her knees.

"In this dream, I walked the grass of a garden where nothing but garden could be. I pulled at the stout branches clustered with apples and dipped my arms in the streams that ran choked with full red blooms of roses. Somewhere, my body trembled. A bit of metal had come dislodged from the barrel that held it and started to break away my face. They took my body and left me with only three apples and three roses to die for. I clutched them to my breast and dropped down to the winds and the huge rooms to put them at the man's table so he would bite the fruit and taste me for what I have come to instead of for what I was."

He sits on the frayed corner of a mattress,  
Bible open on the floor.  
A small apartment, bare bulb burning white  
in a ceiling socket, humming.  
The wooden cross on the wall hangs over a shelf,  
dewy, dust film on thick, shriveled peels  
and a pile of dry petals.



## SS. Vitus and Modestus

*Vitus was the only son of a senator.*

In the library, the boy is at a table  
when his father enters.

Modestus reads, "Matthew 10:35,

For I am come to set a man . . ."

He jerks his fingers away as Hylas slams the book,

"I don't want you reading this around my son."

"Modestus speaks to me of the ferocity of the pagans. How they dipped us in hot liquid lead and smiled as our skin burned black. How they starved great beasts and gave us for meat. I look at my father and shudder."

"My Vitus has a great spirit inside him which his father would vanquish. I tell him he will grow in the power of God and cast out evil wherever he finds it. I tell him he will forge mighty deeds and the dear boy smiles."

*Vitus escaped from Sicily with his tutor, Modestus.*

Wooden boat with old rattling motor.

The sea pitches up the prow

and lets it settle softly again.

Vitus lies between bench-boards.

Modestus holds out his hand

and canopies blue eyes from the sun.

"I am frightened sometimes of the big ships and their sirens, but Modestus tells me God will lower a veil around us and hide us from the hooks and red-eyed men. And when I feel lost in the nothing but blue he tells me that as I sleep at night an angel appears before him to show the way. I see her in my sleep, one firm white hand pulling the boat and the other soft glowing one pointing into the stars."

In the alley, something metal hits ground,  
Vitus wakes up in a huge coat covering knees to neck.  
Modestus puts half a bread loaf in his hand,  
squats beside a trash bin, overflowed piles  
of oily newspapers, ribbons of torn cloth.

"I know of back doors and windows left unlatched. When my Vitus asks me where the food comes from, I tell him of the eagle of God who floats down on vast wings between the ashy stone buildings and brings for us whenever we hunger. The hair on my face grows thicker and I walk with a limp."

Gun cracks and yelling.  
Bands of trampled wheat in a field.  
Man following deep footprints by the riverbank,  
rifle slung over shoulder.  
Hunched in mud, Modestus presses  
the boy's head and whispers, "Quiet, quiet."

"The heathens rise against us. I squeeze my fingers into my ears but still the bangs thud against my bones. Modestus tells me not to worry. If they drop me in lead I will only laugh and feel the dirt burn off my body. If they send me to the beast it will only offer its meek paw and be my pet."

Broad tree trunks, roots twisting out of earth.

Black suits and caps. Steady gun hands.

"Let go of the boy or we'll fire."

Modestus, one hand holding an arm,  
the other with fingers stroking hair.

Vitus looks up at the high branches.

"Our skin splits and we fall. I hold my Vitus, rub his warm face and this is my hand slipping on blood. He cries, he cries and I hold him closer. I feel tired, I whisper, 'I taught you to speak in God's voice.' I am the one. They pull at me, tear us apart."

## St. Amator

Framed in a trellis of flowers, the bishop  
 reads, glasses sitting thick on his nose.  
*The bishop, instead of reading the nuptial blessing,  
 recited the form which was used in the ordination of deacons.*  
 Amator glances at his bride. Her eyes, wide  
 behind the white beaded veil.  
 At night, he stands at a dresser.  
 Martha on the bed, gathering the gown  
 around her legs. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know if the bishop spoke by accident or deliberation, but afterwards I couldn't look at the woman who should have been my wife. I could only think that a man of God had conferred something upon us which we could not profane in the sheets of a bridal bed. My hand on her shoulder, her body quivering as if she wanted to fall away, but she put her hand on mine. I waited for her fingers to grip. They lay still, flesh without pressure, skin without sense. We both knew we would never touch each other again. I bent, kissed the top of her shoulder through the satin and left the room."

In a nun's habit, Martha's face,  
 white and flat-round like a platter.  
 Her brother sits beside her on a bench.  
 Blue flowers in patches on the grass.  
 Her hands clasped in her lap.  
 His hands clutching the bench rim.  
 "Are you really happy here?" he says.  
*Amator, after having laboured for some years as a priest,  
 was elected bishop of Auxerre.*

"Martha's brother Germanus finally found me. He stomped and raged in my office, rattling things. He made threats, his lips curled back, "I saw what you've done to my sister." He found a place to live in the town just to be close to torment me. He stands up in my church and taunts me. I find blasphemous words scrawled on my door in the morning. He sins against the God who judges him just to spite me."

Amator in his black clothes. Sounds  
 from his office. He finds the door  
 unlocked, lets it swing open.  
 The brother's face red, a woman's  
 long bare legs. Desk legs tap the floor.  
 Clothes on the chair. "Get out,  
 you devil, get out." He runs  
 into the hall, grabs his hair and pulls.  
 Germanus' laughter echoing full and loud.

"It became so intolerable I took guards into my service and told them not to spare the man if they saw him. I grew old and wanted a successor to my office. In a visionary dream I saw the long-dead Bishop, his gray-tuft sideburns and compact eyes, standing at the shore

of an ocean. He raised his arms and spoke, 'The Lord parts what has come together.' I watched a dip on the surface of the choppy water. He slowly lowered his hands, the air pressed on the water and split it down the center. In the long corridor between water-walls someone stood up shaking mud from clothes and hair. He walked through the salt spray and when he reached the shore the old man took his hand and turned him to face me. I saw my tormentor smiling at me as the bishop traced a cross on his forehead."

Amator stands at the pulpit of his empty church.  
Two men in blue uniforms bring in Germanus,  
handcuffs, bloodied lips, torn shirt.  
"You must accept the service of God as my successor."  
When the man shakes his head, Amator nods,  
the guards begin with clubs.  
Afterwards, Amator bends down, pulls the man's hair  
to bring his mouth close.  
The guards are lightly tapping the pews  
with black sticks.  
"Please, God, let it stop," says Germanus.  
"Yes, speak only to God from now on."

## St. Clare

"I recall the blessing of palms as a child. I waited in line, quietly watching the color shapes in lit windows. When my turn came I felt shy and looked down at my dress. The bishop descended in his flaring red and put a palm-frond in my hand. I grew older, I left home and found a monastery where they chopped my hair off and draped me in rough cloth. My family demanded that I marry. I wrapped my arms around the altar, pleaded to the figure of Christ above as they pulled at me."

*St. Clare and her communites practised austerities  
which till then had scarcely been known among women.*

Her sisters line up at table, their lips  
cracked, pale, wool robes and short clipped hair.  
She pours water into tin cups  
and breaks pieces of bread off a common loaf.  
High warehouse ceilings, bared steel ducts and pipes.  
When the day begins to pink outside her window,  
she wakes to ring the metal pot choir bell.

"The brethren live at the top of the hill. They established us in the poor house by the long black ruins of the old factory. Sometimes the friars admonish me for my ways. They say I neglect food too much and spite my body on a hard floor to an extreme degree. I gaze into a mirror and see that my body is a full sack of flesh that weighs heavy upon my soul. Beneath this dreaded meat my bones are shapely white and thin like the gossamer limbs of angels in the ether where I will float like the ease of wind. The brethren are the weight of men that bears us down. They are the brothers of Christ, but I am His chosen bride. In my quiet hours I prepare the way for my beloved with long dark leaves and He comes, humble man, tattered clothes."

## St. Colette

"The order of the Poor Clares became my home. I sought to ornament the gray walls with bright patterns of tapestry and fresh flowers in vases. I put a tape player in the main room so we could hear hymns with our meals. I had our old bus repainted in purple with red stripes for glory and told my sisters they could let their hair grow again. 'We will keep our hair under hoods and our faces behind the walls, but Christ will know us as pretty brides.' One day I tried to ask one to water the rose bushes in the yard but no voice came from my mouth. Doctors, tea with honey, potions, nothing helped. I tried to weep but even my sobs were soundless chokes. A picture of St. Clare, gaunt, cheerless, hangs on my wall. I left my shoes by the bed and walked out."

Dirty highway shoulders. Colette's feet  
are blistered and black.  
Cars slow down, passing stares, driving on.  
Her robe patched with random squares,  
thick black stitch-rows.  
*St. Colette went from convent to convent.*  
A nun opens a door and puts coins in her hand.  
She returns them with a folded letter.  
"We have all been lax in preserving  
the austerities of our tradition. The Lord sees, He knows . . ."

"I remember the road and the bitter gravel under my feet. I remember hunger and lying down under trees. I remember the sun's steady white disc. Somewhere I collapsed, saw myself walking on my knees on a long highway stretching into distant hills, my knees inching forward along the yellow stripe. I thought I bore something like a wood crossbeam across my shoulders. Then He was before me on His cross with bleeding hands and ankles. He pulled away from the nails and drifted down. I couldn't move my hands from the stiff wood, but He lifted it away. I awoke with my head on pavement. I choked, spat blood, and finally heard my voice again, rough and coughing, 'Hosanna, hosanna.'"

## St. Theodora

"My husband was a diplomat who brought me to this country and set me in a big house with a gate that slides on greased wheels. In the mornings a sweet voice calls the city to prayers from loudspeakers in the mosque tower. At night we go to dance where men in square caps serve us champagne on trays. Some days I leave my window open, watch the cars over the wall with their tails of black smoke, hot dry air on my skin. I left my rosary in the inner pockets of my suitcase."

The ceiling fan's huge blades scatter  
flies into curtains. Theodora pinches  
a few strands of long red hair  
as the man beside her touches her leg.  
Ice melts into the drinks,  
dancefloor lights brighten and blink out,  
he takes the cigarette from her lips and leans forward.  
At dawn, the man in the corner shack  
is already turning his stack of skewered meat  
over gas flames.  
Guards let her through the gate.

"I bathed before getting into bed. My husband returned later, coat folded over the briefcase in his hand. I tucked my arms far under the pillow and pretended to sleep, still feeling sin on my belly and legs like the crawling of the pink scorpions sold in cages by black-wrapped men on the street. When he kissed my shoulder I remembered the final clench of my rigid halves against the other man. I couldn't look at my husband anymore. When he was home I feigned sickness and lay with sheets over my head. After he left I brushed my hair by the window, watching the guards leaning on their rifles and wiping foreheads. And when I finally opened the suitcase to feel my rosary again I didn't close the lid until I packed it tight with clothes."

She lifts the suitcase with two hands  
up the bus steps. At the first town,  
women beat water buffalo out of the reeds.  
Theodora bunches her dresses  
into the river. The second town,  
she cuts her hair short, filling a dirty  
bathroom drain with red clumps. The third town,  
she buys a man's suit at the market stands.

"The monastery in the desert has turrets and slit windows like a fortress. The courtyard stinks of camels and sand wind blasts the tower bell. They took me in because my lips were small and cracked, my hair trimmed neat, dry, my breasts hidden beneath a loose shirt. The old stone corridors stay quiet except for footsteps and our singing at the afternoon bell. I always wake to bathe before the others, crouching under the pump tap, letting cold water over my shoulders and chest, washing away sin and watching it spiral through the grime in the drain grate. I am not who I was. I perfect with every prayer."

*She lived for many years  
among the monks a life of extraordinary austerity.*

In white robe and sandals, Theodora  
scoops dates into a bag from a market bin,  
ties the bag to the camel saddle.  
A man stands up in a jeep. "Theodora," he calls.  
Her eyes deep and green, searching,  
a soldier beside him at the wheel. "Theodora,  
is it you?" She pushes past  
fruit-sellers, cloth-merchants, beggars,  
into the alley dangling with necklaces on arms.  
"Wait, please, I've searched for you  
for so long."

"I had fallen backwards into sin, unaware in alcohol and tongue kisses. I pushed my way out and stepped forward into this other place where the desert enveloped the stark stone and kept me safe. But when my husband loomed up before me again I saw pincers clamp on metal wire and the leer in the eyes above the covered mouths. The camel lumbered around in the square, dripping fruit from rents cut in the bag. Outside the town I jumped off and threw sand into my face. His name is Sin, he motors over the dunes, someplace. Sand in my eyes, stinging. Sand in my nose, choking. Sand within me, tearing."



## St. Christopher

"I met a man of wealth who accepted me to drive his long white car. I bore him from his castles to the runways and money-houses as he smoked and laughed into his telephone. 'The Devil is out here,' he once told me. 'He rages about the streets in his burning machines, leading his followers. Drive on. He won't see me behind the tinted glass. Drive on.' In the rear view, I watched him touch points on his body and mutter. Then I knew there was someone greater than he."

*"I go to seek the Devil, for to be my master."*

Symbols chalked on the sidewalk. Christopher  
wipes powder from his hands. Dusk brings a dull film  
over the sky. He waits. A cat scrapes  
its quick claws on a wall when the car arrives.  
Black steel husk. Wide tires, door  
swung open. "Get in, I'm the one you seek."  
Hair pulled back with grease, soot  
speckling the hard squares of teeth.  
A wheel-scream digs black marks on the pavement.

"No light entered through his windows, only shapes of alleys and edifices. He spun the car in circles, he raced, he defied the street contours. 'You may serve me to find more servants,' he said. Somewhere ahead I saw a tower topped with a stone cross. He cursed and turned the car around. When I asked him why, he said, 'I knew a man pinned to a cross like that who never died, so I flee from that symbol.' I made the sign before him and the Devil stopped and pushed me out on the concrete. I left to seek a greater master. A small man by a river in a lonely place showed me a boat and an oar and told me Jesus would come to take me in His service."

*Then went Christopher to this river  
and made a dwelling-place for himself.*

He's lying back on the flattened grass  
when the woman arrives, black hair  
under a blue hood, infant huddled in her arms.

"Can you return in a while? I'm resting."

"I must get across now, we have nowhere else to go."

He groans, he shuts his eyes, he pulls himself up.

She sits in the stern, quiet,  
as he glides the boat through the water reeds.

"The wails of a crying child woke me that night. I looked out the door of my shack and saw a man glowing in white with wide arms standing on my boat. 'Christopher, didn't you know me when you bore me?' Then he melted into the sway of the reeds. I walked into the water, slowly, felt out each muddied step, until the surface muck floated at my neck and I stretched out my arms for balance. I shut my eyes. I wanted to smother my face in the mud below me. I didn't know You, my Lord. You were a small suffering thing, then You were the glow on the water. I hesitated, but my doubt is the reeds that bend in the flow and my devotion is my stillness. When I emerged I went back to the city where the Devil rides and let his engined minions break my body. And only when they

tightened the rope around my neck and I felt the final flutters of my life did the Lord speak to me again, 'I accept you, my Christopher.'"

### St. Barbara

Barbara's father built a mansion near the sea  
and kept her amongst rows of white statues,  
high cathedral ceilings and double-thick curtains.  
Barbara wanders rooms in her white dress,  
surprising herself in mirrors, finding windows to gaze  
through grasses at the thin leaf of ocean.

"My father brought home young men in fine clothing who smiled at me over tall wine glasses. I would stare at the table, knowing that I would never marry. My father left and went over the sea. I walked by the long pool in the yard with the statues on their firm pedestals. The Holy Spirit came in a drop of light, severing the sky, separating the water, and I felt the dancing of God within me. My father only worshipped the idols of his own excess. I toppled all of the naked statues, watched their heads snap off, clean marble rolling and drowning in the glass-blue water."

Barbara lives in the shed by the pool.  
Driving pumps vibrate in the walls,  
a leaking pipe drips dirty green.  
In summer the long grass turns brown  
and clicks with the jumps of grasshoppers.  
Barbara cups her hands over them,  
just before they leap, and pushes them in her mouth,  
*following the holy precursor of our Lord, John the Baptist.*

"I heard a car in the drive and knew my father had returned. I kneeled by the pool, shut my eyes and prayed quietly. He called my name but I waited. My legs felt slight tremors in the concrete from his footsteps and I heard pieces of marble picked up and put down, imagined him examining the shattered arms and faces. 'What happened to the statues,' he asked. 'I struck down your idols,' I said, 'because you and your riches keep me from my God.' The footsteps came closer, stepped slowly behind me. I shut my eyes tighter, tried to picture the pool with Jesus on the still water, coming across to me with offered palm, whispering, 'Peace, child, peace.' My father's hand came down against my face."

Barbara's father finds smashed windows,  
paintings X'd out with black brushstrokes,  
dishes lying in jagged shapes on a table.  
He drives her to a building on a hill,  
she sits motionless in the back seat.  
They lay her on a metal table, a man  
greases her temples and forces a rubber wedge in her mouth.

"When they let the current in, my mouth filled with a warm froth and my eyes fell back and sank in the deepness of a black well, overwhelming, comprising me, drowning me. Somewhere in the dark spots a voice called to me, 'Come, Barbara my bride.' The searing stopped and I rested for a moment. The second time the voice spoke, 'Rest with me in the house of my father.' When the voice spoke for the third time, 'I offer what you need of me,' I knew the current would stop my heart, and in the final second I could see my

father consumed to the perfection of black ash by the lightning of God as he sat at his desk counting his broken pieces."

**II**  
**SUFFERING**

### St. Anastasius the Persian

"When I was six I lost my way in the street where market-men yell and show carved hilts of knives against swatches of black cloth. In the alley I sat and gathered my knees to my chest. An old man with a gouged red pit where an eye had been stopped on his way. He leaned over me and opened his robe. I saw the smooth figure of a man fixed to cross-pieces of gold. I stopped crying, reached for the dangling body and fingered the small outstretched arms while I watched the man's single scarred eye staring at me."

Anastasius in Europe,  
long stone halls of cathedrals,  
candles on metal trays, burning, hollow steps.  
Float of dust on statues.  
*The pictures which he saw made a great impression.*  
Pale stomach pierced with arrow shafts,  
splashes of blood, a lopped head  
in red patched grass, alone,  
a stout man holding his flayed skin like a cloak,  
peaceful closed eyes, a halo.  
*At length he went to Jerusalem,*  
*where he received baptism.*

"In my home country I felt nothing amid temples grown over with flower-writing, whispering along windows and doors, 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his only prophet.' My brothers bowed low and nourished their faiths while I hid in a tiny room over a candy shop, smelled sweet things cooked in pots, looked at the postcards of paintings secreted in my book, and wanted nothing but to give my life for my Lord."

The man at the narrow black desk  
has a huge mustache and battle-gray uniform.  
He plays with his pen and unfolds  
a long slice of yellow paper.  
"The king says you may live your life  
as a Christian, so long as you deny Christ on paper."  
White jet exhaust trails like pastry  
outside the iron-barred window.  
Anastasius' cheeks are burn-red, his eyes puffed black.  
A soldier titters in the corner.  
"I believe in one God and in Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only-begotten son of God."

"In the daytime I dug my heels into dirt, bearing stones. In the night I shivered in the black of a concrete cell. Sometimes in the mornings I could hear the ropes snap taut with the weight of bodies. I would shut my eyes tight and pray and try to form him in the spots of my vision, the blood dripping in minute rows from the arrows, the bound wrists, one eye a scar, a ripped eyelid, an open mouth. 'I haven't really suffered,' I whispered. 'I see you, I haven't suffered at all.'"

Anastasius is last in the line.

Each man is nudged to the scaffold  
with a gun-barrel,  
then a signal swings open the trapdoor.  
Anastasius prays aloud.  
The man before him stares in his face,  
"What has your Christ done for you?"  
A neck snaps, somebody crumples on the ground.  
"I only regret that I cannot perform  
a more lingering death for my Lord."

## St. Theodosia

"I spend my nights bearing drinks to small tables and waiting for money. Glasses half-filled with melted ice at closing time. Spills and ashes on the floor. I leave for home just before dawn. Street sweepers whirl their brushes and garbage trucks strain forks lifting over-laden dumpsters. A billboard hangs above the sidewalk on my way. 'HE HAS ARISEN' in gold letters over His portrait in white robe, offered hands, halo of shimmer yellow against a paradise background. I stop sometimes and bend to one knee for prayer, imagining away the buzzing sweeper engines."

A man on a ladder strips away  
painted panels, green hilltops, turquoise sky.  
Halo removed in square pieces.  
Theodosia, blue makeup dried  
under her eyes, dropped purse.  
"No, you can't do that."  
He yells when she pushes the ladder.  
*The man fell and died.*

"They put me in a cell. The woman in the bunk next to mine cries at night, shakes in her covers in the morning. They had asked me why I killed an innocent man, and I could only say that he tried to topple an icon of the Lord. I see the man face down in a halo of spreading blood. I see empty white where the face of Christ had been. I see gathering faces and pointed fingers. I know myself as a thief watching the dark undersides of clouds boiling. The man next to me cannot hold up his crown and the other man laughs. If I can be the one who screams at him, tears his footing away so he cannot speak or blaspheme, my place must be beside God. I sit on the soiled mattress of a metal bed and wait."



### The Nagasaki Martyrs

"The ocean was a long fever-dream. I rested, read verses, watched the gun men practice their trajectories. After disembarking I found villages built on pools of water, the shaking hands of beggars, dirtied little fists grabbing in black pots. The temples are guarded with the wild faces of angry red gods. I came to sow this land with crosses."

"The wings of my bomber split and flamed into the Pacific. I struggled in chute-cords until the waves tossed me on fields of tiny rocks where I walked hunched-over, furtively watching the swaying trees, pistol in my hand. I found a man sitting cross-legged in piles of sand, his robe loose around a thin body, his head bald. His eyes had the cold stare, emptiness. I buried the gun in the sand and knew that I wanted to find Christ a place inside this man."

"In my collar I stood before a man with uniform and radiating sun patched on his arm. He touched the hilt of his sword and told me he was my lord and master. 'Christ is my only master,' I said, 'and He will conquer this land too.' I watched a twitch at the corner of his mouth. He picked up his telephone handset and then I waited until they came for me."

"I was a child with hunger and sadness for names. I beat my way through muddied streets and slept in beds of leaf and torn paper until the kind man took me in, clothed me in clean white and hung a cross about my neck. He told me I would help him serve the body of the Lord. I could only smile and bow my head."

A march by a pale lake,  
village square where the ears are sliced.  
Faces squeeze through windows,  
gasp, watching blood spray white cheeks.  
Walk up the hill  
where the trees are ribbed with mist  
and the ridge topped with crosses.  
*Each martyr had an executioner near him*  
*with a spear ready to pierce his skin.*  
Some scream, one shuts his eyes tight,  
another curses.

"There are things that I know and things that will always be unknown to me. I know this is no Via Dolorosa, no holy mount, only an uncomprehending, alien land. With nails in my wrists I waited and watched the slow launch of clouds over the horizon. At the strike of the easy blade my head fell forward and I closed my eyes, closed them tight to my vision of the end of this place, the wrath of heaven opening up and dropping a bloom of fire over hills and paper houses."

## St. Gummarus

A fan gyrates, blowing the red ribbon  
 tied to its grille. Bedcovers piled on the floor,  
 one thin yellow sheet over them.  
 She's on her side, hands tucked under pillow,  
 Sweat drops hesitating along her shoulder.  
 Gummarus watches the ceiling.  
 He rolls and runs his palm across her waist,  
 down over her hip. His kiss  
 between hair strips on her neck. Her eyes,  
 opening, jerk of her body, sheet pulled up.  
 "Don't touch me, I told you never again."

"I married for love, a woman with huge black eyes and a lovely mouth who wept under  
 her bridal veil and held my hand tightly when we walked to the car. But she became  
 someone else. She tended to our son, stirred meals in pots, and watched television  
 silently, without gesture, did nothing with me but walk away. I found letters concealed  
 in drawers and learned about meetings with a man over drinks in small glasses, cars under  
 bridges, rooms where flies ticked against windows. I picked up the book of my youth,  
 found the God whom I had abandoned. If the Lord wanted me to suffer a contemptuous  
 spouse, then I had to suffer. When they summoned me for the war I kissed my young son  
 and asked her to please take good care of him."

*Returning home, he found his wife  
 had thrown all things in disorder.*  
 The duffelbag he drops  
 knocks over a glass. Red-brown crusted plates,  
 clothes lumped on sofa and counters.  
 The boy crawls under a chair,  
 clutches knees to his chest, quivers.  
 "I'm your father, remember?"

"I sat with my son for a long time before he would even talk to me or touch the candy in  
 my hand. He said his mother had warned him about me, how I had beaten him as an infant  
 and was coming back with my rifle to get him. I asked him if he remembered any verses I  
 had taught him. His head bowed, eyes hidden behind a tuft of unkempt hair, he repeated  
 with me, slowly, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?' My son came  
 to my breast and I picked him up. My wife returned, her purse swinging. He turned away  
 from her, nuzzled his face against my neck. She stood and looked at us for a long time,  
 her legs starting to bend, the pink remains of lipstick on her mouth. She dropped to her  
 knees. 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' she said. 'Why did you do this?' 'Please, I can't lose my  
 son, please,' she said. I went to her, placed my hand in the tangles of her hair. 'Please,  
 forgive me.' 'God has mercy,' I said."

Gummarus wakes in the sunlit  
 sheet wrapped around his body.  
 Closet open, bare wire hangers,  
 empty beds, his dress uniform shirt

draped on the bed with a note in pocket.  
"Don't bother doing anything, go back to sleep,  
the three of us are already long gone."  
He smashes plates in the kitchen,  
dirty ivory shards collect on the tiles  
where thick black roaches scurry under the refrigerator.

## St. Eutropius

"I came to the town when the farmlands were packed hard with frost. They yelled, threw cans and chased me away when I tried to teach them of God. I left by the main road while the tractors hummed and churned up clouds of yellow chaff. By a peach orchard I found a flat rock to sit on. Eustella visits me when she can get away from her father. Cross-legged amid the dark peels of rotted fruit, she questions me about heaven and Christ. When she leaves I force my concentration on the life of my spirit until the hanging globes of fruit melt from my sight and nothing of their heavy bruised scent remains."

Eustella's father holds a gold watch on a chain.  
The butcher rubs the moist lumps  
of blood and bone from his white sleeves.  
Metal saws whirl, racked meat slides on rails.  
"By this time tomorrow let it be done."  
Eutropius's fingers are folded together,  
his robe dangles over the rock's gray sides  
as two men emerge from the orchard.  
*Eustella found him dead with his skull split by an axe.*

"Dear Eustella, they come for me the way they always come, not knowing that I am the rock that emerges from the earth and they are just the stench of the decaying. I know you'll cry when you find me, for I've felt love from you on the afternoons you got up shaking leaves from your hair, but then I would sit and will your feelings into the peaches rotting in the dirt. You must not suffer my loss the way you feel the distance of God, and you must not bear me to burial as tightly as you hold the Holy Spirit. Love only the eternal, Eustella. All that can fade must fade from you."

## St. Rita

"The man who became my husband used to call my name and pound the hood of his car. I would descend the steps by twos and run past my parents who lifted the curtain flaps, frowning. Years later the car hit the garage door and he came in exhaling scotch. 'Rita, my cigarettes. Did you touch my cigarettes?' He found me dropping butt-ends out the window. I saw his rage, I felt the wall, I touched my blood."

Rita in pink nightgown,  
 Burning cigarette, dark whiskey in a glass.  
 The ringing makes her shake her head,  
 tap ashes into a plate, pick up the phone.  
 "Dead? Are you sure? I need to be sure."

"My husband was placed to rest with holes in his chest and neck. I applied at a convent, but they would only accept virgins. I slept on the doorstep for three nights. On the final morning they opened their doors to me. My superior tested me. She asked me to begin each day by watering a rose bush in the garden. I found only a dead black stump in dry earth, but I doused it every morning until the dirt cracks filled. She would watch me sometimes, impassive eyes and a sliver of a smile. 'I've suffered worse,' I said. 'And you shall suffer more.'"

"And then thorny vines wound into a crown  
 were placed on his head," speaks the man at the pulpit.  
 Crucifixion statue, body in yellow wood,  
 blood painted as scarlet teardrops.  
 Kneeling sisters, listening.  
 Rita puts palm to head, winces, faints.  
 Hands upon her, voices beside her.  
 "She's cut her forehead."  
*It developed into an open wound which suppurated and became  
 so offensive that she had to be secluded from the rest.*

"My superior had someone place food at my door but forbade me to leave. A wicked thorn from the crown had pierced my skin and bled me every evening. I've known the red web pain of thorns and the searing patch of a cigarette put out on my arm. I've always obeyed the hand that was placed over me. On my deathbed, I asked for a rose from the bush in the garden. The superior whispered to not hope for such things, but one of my sisters returned with a full red flower on a stem shaved smooth of its thorns. I held it to my neck, felt for the only and final time petals dropping off onto my skin, the stem wilting, dying into my dying hands."

### St. Thalelaeus the Hermit

"I only spent a few years with my mother. The black spiral would glow with a ring of tiny blue when she took my hand and pressed. In the space between the wall and the backyard fence I soothed my palm in mud. Things dropped and broke inside when she cried. 'This is not my life. This can't be.' The rings burned, her hair hung in dark little curls. I found the razor in the soapdish and her blood on the flower-blue tiles."

On the corner, Thalelaeus hands out  
folded tracts in many colors. He gestures  
crosses in the air. White board  
at his feet, painted in red letters,  
"God is not a God of disorder but of peace."  
At night he pulls the board over his legs.  
Men enter and leave the building,  
sometimes they toss needles into the alley.

"I kept my temple where the unworthy worship the stinging of their own blood and laugh in their filthy rooms. Cars float by dripping oil while I try to slow them with benedictions. They are still moving, they know nothing. This is the world of sharp knives, burning, chill wind that stiffens the bones, billows of steam rising from the iron grating. I found a crate to use for a cage. Slats of wood keep my body clinched in the sight of the Lord Father."

*Thalelaeus spent sixty years in the ascetic life,  
weeping almost without intermission.*

One man wears a trenchcoat,  
the other encased in leather.  
"Is he dead?" "I don't know, kick him."  
"Come on, he's an old man."  
Boot-kick into the crate. Huddled form.  
"Wait, you see? He's crying."  
They leave when the rain begins.  
Gutters stop up with paper trash,  
water floods over the curb, into the street.

## St. Antony, Part I

Antony walks at night on black streets,  
 watching the yellow shine of streetlamps  
 on his old boots, stepping with a steady tap-tap.  
 In the daytime he looks up and follows  
 trails of clean white stripes across the blue.  
 In the night he translates the anatomy of cracks  
 in pavement and concrete walls.

"My mother and father returned to God and left me a huge house built up with bricks  
 on the crest of a hill, but I followed the course of Jesus and turned my estates to pockets  
 of charity. Now when I wander, I feel air and fluttering white wings in my right ear, while  
 the Devil whispers in my left. He calls me up to his doorway and takes my hand in his  
 dirty fat fingers. When his breath is upon me I hear him say, 'A man of power and wealth  
 can better serve the Lord.' I could have had all these things, and much more, and I could  
 have furnished his houses with riches but now I am here."

*The devil harassed him night and day  
 with gross and obscene imaginations.*  
 The one by the theater doors  
 is little more than a boy,  
 clean shape of his chin,  
 dirt spots under fingernails.  
 Antony, hands in pockets,  
 sits on the bench and watches.  
 The boy's eyes big under thin brows,  
 the boy stooping to an unrolled window,  
 the boy tracing a name on an iced windshield.

"I have known the touch of this hand. This hand is young and soft, its nails bitten, its  
 knuckles slight red ridges. Somewhere in secret I looked up. He was the boy, he was the  
 man, he was the pumping blood. And the hand is life. It lifts shirt-ends and finds buttons,  
 its rude nails are sharp, it has soft pads under the fingers, it weighs the skin, it is solid. It  
 works around muscle and fibrous hairs. But a voice fell like a slap on my other ear and I  
 knew what only I could know. The Devil animates this hand and sings through the lips.  
 So I pushed him away, and back. He swore, but I put the money in his hand and told him,  
 'Sin no more.'"

In the desert, only the wind and things in sand  
 move with life. Only the browned weeds shiver.  
 Antony wants nothing but the narrow shack  
 whose cracked walls offer nothing  
 but peels of wood baking off in thin curls.  
*A friend brought him bread from time to time.*  
 Young man in a gray pickup truck, collar  
 buttoned tight around his neck,  
 leaves a paper sack at the door and drives away.

"Satan makes horrible sounds to frighten me at night, and sometimes as I sleep he comes to me in demon-form with rough nails, clawing me, plunging at me. Sometimes he pulls me so tight my spirit clinches up and I wake with a dreadful sin spilled out on my mat. I break my fingers with wood, I curl up and roll on the rocks and twigs, I cry to God. Once when I lay beaten and my arms stung, my Lord came down and beheld my struggle. When He wrapped His arms around me, His long hair brushed my shoulders and I felt the dried up scabs in the centers of His palms. I pulled them to my lips and kissed. 'I am here, I will always protect you.'"



### The Martyrs of North America

"We came to a bitter land in a valley where brown hardened men work oil machines and the women wash their long hair in steel pots and dry it in desert wind. We found liquor and fighting, sorcery taught to their sons and their daughters climbing out of cars at night, and no sign that God had ever been inside these fences."

When the warm winds come the reservation land  
dries to a bitter husk. The land cannot hold  
crops, it only yields the dry and the dead.  
*The sorcerors could do nothing  
and the indians were in despair.*  
John de Brebeuf in a robe, his finger  
long and pointing, "Your magic is like  
the blowing dust, submit your pains only to God."

"I was sickly as a child. I coughed and lay on the floor because I couldn't stand right. But when I pushed those people to the ground and made them pray the rain began to fill the fissures in the dead earth, and I stood before them to say in the loudest voice I could summon, 'This is His blessing upon you.'"

In the mornings the air is light and blue.  
The horizon quivers with heat. Antony Daniel  
Follows the men when they pack their rifles  
and watch over the yellow weeds in the hills.  
He leans close to a shoulder draped with feathers  
clipped in black hair. "I can tell you of a place  
where unending gun blasts will shatter your ears."

"These men are simple and cruel. They create gods out of beastly things. They talk only of land and fighting. In the highlands, they watch the roads and practice on empty bottles. I look, and look away, and when they listen I teach them of hell and paradise in the fiery words they understand."

Spiky pads of cactus in the small garden  
where Rene Goupil teaches the children.  
Chins propped on small fists, twigs  
digging circles into sand.  
He waves one hand across the burnt-red dirt  
and points to the sky with the other.

"A little girl sat on her knees on an old wooden porch. I traced a cross on her forehead and her father came out to tell me to leave. I made the cross again, her eyes expectant, understanding, receiving God and peace. The father slapped my hand away. On the third time, he leveled a gun at my breast."

Circle of men, crossed legs, mosquitoes  
looping in flame light.  
One man chants, rhythm kept with a stick.

Another nudges a pipe into the fire's spatter,  
 the last sucks in, eyes shut, cheeks red.  
 Noel Chabanel snatches the tube, mutters, "Sorcery."

"Their food smells dirty like the age-old sand pits, the men stink of black oil, and their women have narrow eyes like wolves. I stay in my cabin mostly and study scripture. When the children rap on my window and laugh I drive them away with a stout branch."

The desert floor trembles  
 from the wheels of heavy trucks. Shrill cracks  
 of loudspeakers, clacks of engaged guns.  
 In the cabin, robed men sit on sawdust, others pace  
 from window to door, guns hefted in nervous hands.  
 Two men pull up Gabriel Lalemant by the arms,  
 faces masks of colored stripes.  
*Lalemant raised his eyes to heaven  
 and with sighs invoked God's aid.*

"We had heard stories, whispers. They had killed an important man somewhere, and when they saw soldiers coming they penned us in the cabin where we had tried to set up our chapel. They swore they would kill one each hour. After I was born they baptized me at a holy font. Before I died they baptized me with boiling water. After I died they drank my blood while it still flowed warm."

Soldiers thick in their ribbed black vests,  
 pushing rifles into doorways and windows.  
 Screams in the cabins, discharges  
 of white smoke float over roofs.  
 Charles Garnier on his knees by the well,  
 palms pressed to ears. He opens his eyes  
 and peers over the cracked stone.

"I could not see the soldiers stop shooting for the sake of women or the young. Blood of children spouted as dark and forceful as the blood of men. I dipped a handkerchief in a pail and baptized all. I soaked a woman's forehead and whispered, 'Calm yourself, you need not cry when the kingdom of God is at hand.' One bullet went through both of us."

Isaac Jogues is the last one. Men  
 crouch and fire wild out the windows.  
 One clicks a cartridge into a stock  
 and looks back at him, collar ripped at the edge,  
 praying. "You should never have come here."  
 Isaac convulses, rolls on thick wood powder  
 after he is shot through his clasped hands.

"I alone survived my brothers and went home with mutilated hands. At first they told me I could not perform the mass with such fingers, but I pleaded the blood I shed for our faith. Sometimes the wafer slips from my fingers and the older women kiss the scars on my

palms. Sometimes when I press them together in prayer I weep as they start to bleed again."

## St. Humphrey

Humphrey gets off the bus at the cathedral steps.  
Two worn suitcases and a felt hat.  
Stone facade. Carved skulls  
top each door. In the square, the bus horn  
startles a stray dog.

"My new home in France was lit in roses of stained glass and kept the dust of ages in its corners. The congregation learned to follow me. Tradesmen and farmers and their wives sang hymns at my instruction. Then the radios crackled with news of war in the East. The marauding army had broken through and I asked the people to join my prayers for peace. I read. They bowed their heads. The sky hummed with bombers."

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding  
shall keep your hearts and minds."  
Humphrey's folded hands shake. Bomb blasts.  
Siren sounds and screams.  
In the pews, children are hushed against mothers,  
wide eyes, shut eyes, prayers.  
"We must leave and find shelter," he says.  
A woman gets up to grab his arm,  
"The house of God is our only safe place."  
He pushes her hand away and runs.

"I found a ditch to hide in. The bombers broke the town, tossed bricks and wood over the streets. Tanks and men in gray came. In the morning, the air smelled of burning and cones of smoke rose from the town. I ripped potatoes from the ground and ate. A man carrying a cane came striding by the roadside. 'You shouldn't be in the open, it's still not safe,' I said. He smiled and stuck his cane in the loose dirt. 'I am a shepherd. My flock scattered during the bombing, and I can't rest until I have gathered them again.' Somewhere on the road I found the carcass of a sheep, its stomach ripped open by shrapnel."

*St. Humphrey went back to his devastated see.*  
Cathedral ceiling lies in shattered  
lumps of stone and cracked wood over split pews.  
The woman under the blocks of a wall, statue  
of Christ across her smashed back.  
He prays in the aisle, snow flecks down  
and piles on broken wedges of red glass.

"I have read of men and women who stood and faced jaws of lions with nothing but determined smiles of faith, but I am the one who ran and left my people and my pulpit to the invader. They came back to me. In the daytime they sing hymns while birds chirp and fly circles in the hole above. At night they huddle in cloaks and burn candles. Sometimes helmeted men perform executions in the square outside. I once hid a man in a closet while they searched. Still, every night I see the woman's face falling under crushing wood and stone. I swore never to abandon them again, and I often see the

shepherd in the distance leading his flock, but the mark of blood is made on the face, and wood is a dreadful weight that crushes hearts."

## St. Clarus

"I was just fourteen. Where the huge tree ran with sap and brown mushrooms grew wide hats in its shade, she took my hand. 'Come on,' she said. 'I'll teach you,' she said. 'I know what to do,' she said. When she lay back I thought of the grass crushed beneath her, green squeezed down, juice staining her dress. 'It's okay,' she said. 'Don't be afraid,' she said. I watched my hand follow hers, my knuckles against warm clothes and her legs smelled of grass and her eyes closed. I pulled my hand away, my burning fingers. 'What's wrong with you?' she said. 'You little coward,' she yelled. 'I'll tell everyone.' I ran, into the creek I fell, I cried into the water."

Clarus packs milk crates on a truck-bed  
and delivers in the morning. Afternoons,  
traveling to knock on village doors,  
"I bring good news of the Lord."  
She drives in long silver steel, sunglasses  
and flapping scarf. A man to open  
her double doors, another who clears plates.  
In the evening, lean red nightgown to her ankles,  
"You should come in for a while."

"She had long arms and bare round shoulders so close I could see tiny freckles beside her gown-strap. I've dreamt of this, yes I've dreamt. I've wanted to know, yes to know, without fear, how arms feel, how flesh is firm. I couldn't believe the smile, couldn't look at the eyes, saw nothing but fingers on my arms, my balance thrown by a slight tug, tingle perfume scent, the hot wet smell. I watched the barren space of her hardwood floor between us, sway of red cloth, shimmer. 'I'm a man of God.' 'Yes, but that doesn't matter now.' Holy Spirit, compel me, Holy Spirit, save me, Holy Spirit, let me lose myself. I knocked the milk bottle over on the patio. Glass white rolling down steps. The final pose of her hips in the doorway."

*The woman in revenge had him ferreted out by two ruffians.*  
Parking brake set, farmhouse by dirt road.  
His fingers around the wide bottle necks.  
Black coats behind the fence, crowbars hooked in belts.  
"You turned down the wrong woman."  
Engine idling, blue fume stream.  
His legs pulled apart. "There, kick him there."  
Milk poured on his face, frothing in his nostrils,  
mixing into blood.

### St. Mary Francis

"My father made many plans for me, receiving guests at his patio table while mother served coffee and pastries. He would pat my head with one hand, leaning on his silver-knobbed cane with the other. 'You will marry and live in a huge house,' he told me. He never saw that I spent an hour in prayer every evening in the foggy light of candles in glass. Finally I told him I wanted to devote the secrets of my body and soul to no one but Christ the Lord. He spat and dragged me by the shoulder to my room where he pushed me to the ground. A lock clasped on my door and I heard the raps of his cane receding. Mother screamed and he yelled for hours. I turned the radio up loud. A voice told of people setting fires in a city and I felt my world collapsing. In the night, my mother woke me from the floor, told me to be quiet and pack a bag. We met a bus before the dawn began. He died before I saw him again."

*While making the stations of the cross,  
she would experience pains corresponding to those of the passion.*  
Where thorns hold rigid in thick-oil hair,  
Mary Francis winces and rubs her forehead.  
Where the cross has wood whorls in fine strokes,  
she bends over, walks with shoulder hunched.  
Where a hammer is frozen in midstrike,  
she falls and screams. They gather,  
unfold her fingers and kiss her palms.

"I was always small and sickly. I couldn't stand in the sun without feeling for the ground beneath me. But I asked God if I might take on the pains of all the souls languishing in purgatory. They come to me sometimes. Soft white figures in hoods standing at my bedside. 'Please pray for us,' they say. 'The mountain's vast stony hulk is spiralled with tunnels for our wandering, but the day is coming for us to slip into the seams of our forgotten corpses and rise in full coats of healed flesh. Please pray.'"

Mary Francis small at a microphone stand,  
slide shows, crowd praying as one.  
She smiles with each book she signs.  
TV screen filled with gray-tone soldiers,  
riot shields forced against a pressing throng,  
flame cloud opening in smoke circles,  
a face, hair in a bow, a hand  
holding a Bible. "These are the days  
of the end of time, pray and repent."

"I have visions of Sodoms lying in smoldering bricks and madmen lighting soaked rags jammed into bottles. Every person I see is ringed with a halo of gold filigree or supports an aura of tiny fires. The crowds wear death masks and stars wink out in the sky every night. Once a tapping cane brought a voice I knew into my room. 'I didn't think you would make it to the mountain,' I said. 'The Lord hasn't judged me as harshly as you have.' I looked once at the light folds around the face, then looked away. 'Forgive me, Mary Francis, I need your prayers.' I bear the weight of the collapsing world on my shoulders and wordless pangs of the wandering dead in my palms, but my father is a pain I

can only flee, a fleck of spit sizzling on my arm."

Metro sliding to a stop on squeaking tracks,  
suits, handbags, watches checked,  
pneumatic hiss of opening doors.  
Mary Francis, her hands on the stairway rails,  
pushing people aside, yelling, "The world  
must come to an end, feel it fall around you,  
tear it all down with me."  
When she falls, they move around her,  
eyes ahead, purses and briefcases held close.



## St. Bernadette

Three girls by the fence.  
 "Ghosts in there." "I dare you."  
 "I'm not afraid," says Bernadette.  
 Her small fingers in the chain links.  
 Weeds sprout from split pavement, twisted  
 roller coaster tracks, broken pieces,  
 boarded-up funhouse windows.  
 She holds a rosary, walks, whispering.  
 "Blessed is the fruit of Thy womb."  
 Rows of dusty bulbs around the carousel,  
 a unicorn with a broken stump.

"The old merry-go-round began to turn. Lights flashed, pipes sent out loops of shrill, sweet organ songs. She floated in front of it all in her covering of white, her shape flickering like an image from an old film. The horses bobbed on their gold candy shafts, blue, red, green plumes came alive on their foreheads. I fell. Her arms, opening. Bow of her head. Nothing but the music and the play inside my mind. When the music was still clear music a child leapt happy in the womb-arms. The other child rides innocent in the temple among children. I found him smiling, speaking of his father bearing him up, but I could not promise the children happiness in their lives."

The woman in the nice coat holds a microphone  
 and tape machine. "Are you sure she'll come?"  
 Bernadette rolls the beads in her hand.  
 A man looks at his watch, a boy  
 points at a plastic clown-face.  
 Bernadette drops into the woman's arms.  
 Doctor feels the pulse, lifts eyelids.  
 Her lips moving,  
 "Now and at the hour of our death."  
 Rosary necklace draped across the concrete.

"The microphone snapped away from my face and the horses began their dance that dissolved the many whispers at my side. She was there, a smile, strobing. When her child falls from the unicorn the other children laugh. The lights are huge bursting flowers in his weeping eyes. I held my son on the stains of pink candy and lifted the twist of barb wire from his forehead. I prayed for all the children who kicked him and who tore the wood with iron bars.' The unicorn horn broke off in my fist as I awoke."

*The last solemn apparition took place on April 7,  
 when there was a crowd of people—1200 or 1300.*  
 Bernadette, kneeling before an array of microphones.  
 Men adjust TV cameras. In two lines,  
 people approach to drop flowers on the horses.  
 Bernadette's voice over speakers, "And lead us  
 not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

"In my eyes the broken horses leapt into new glossy coats and glittering saddles. The mother lifts the child. He laughs and claps despite the wounds in his hands. The other children gather candy drops from the carousel platform. 'My child and I took on crowns above where all is spinning roses with children as angels dancing in the petal folds. Where the children laugh is my chapel.' When I awoke, hands were grasping the fringe and sleeves of my dress. 'Touch us, bless us,' they insisted. I watched my rosary ripped apart, single beads falling into cracks in the cement."

*As a measure of protection, she was after a while  
taken to reside with the nuns at the hospice.*

Bernadette eats soup with a large spoon  
when the sister comes in.

"There's someone you have to meet."

Pat on the head as they walk the hall.

In the room, one man has a camera on his shoulder.

The other is wearing a suit.

Her eyes begin to gather tears. "Be brave, sit down."

The man smiles. "It's okay, just tell us what you saw."

"Nothing. I made it all up."

The cameraman shakes his head,  
shuts off his machine and turns away.

### St. Theophilus the Penitent

Sunlight from a high window  
strikes floating dust and wood table.  
Theophilus leans forward in a chair,  
"Have I displeased you in some way?"  
The bishop dangles a metal rosary from one hand,  
fingers the cross with the other.  
"No, I just have no more use for you."

"I walked out into the long grainy hallway with its row of glass-covered portraits trimmed in careful red piping. I cursed his name but ignored the little hole I felt ripping open in my soul. Someone floated down to me that night in a gray robe and long, dark-wet hair. 'I am the angel of Earth,' he said. 'My glimmering is of the white foam tipped atop a flowing wave and the breezy shakes of light leaves in wind. I offer mortal gain and power and right wrongs in the land of the living. My staff is of the same potent wood Moses used against his foes. Take hold of it and it will aid you in your troubles.' Thin white twigs woven into one made up the staff. I wrapped my hand around it and when I let go I could see my fingerprints burned on the white."

*The bishop, by some diabolic spell,  
was induced to lay aside his prejudices.*  
The deep organ bellow vibrates  
in wood of pews and the floor. The woman  
stands before Theophilus, smiles a little.  
A wine chalice gleams in tooled designs  
and gold. He holds it out to her.  
"The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
which was shed for thee."  
When it falls from his fingers, she gasps.  
Loud clatter of metal, rolling, striking steps.  
A purple streak down her dress.  
"It slipped. It just slipped," he says.

"When I hear confession, the penitent's voice fades and I can only hear the swish of leaves and buckling of waves. My eyes can no longer focus on holy words. One night a woman appeared kneeling beside my bed. I saw long black hair hanging to the small of her back. She shook her head, the hair fell to the side, a bare white back cross-hatched with marks of blood. 'You have beaten me, Theophilus,' she said, the horror of blood dripping down her skin to my floor. 'Why have you beaten me.' She turned and when I saw her face the hole in my soul burned and I collapsed to the floor. She held a bloodied staff and I could see the black marks of my fingers on its heft. 'Mother of God, forgive me.'"

A day at the Madonna statue in the courtyard.  
Stone spotted with light rain, soaked clothes.  
One perfect carved face. One pleading voice.  
Gestures of contrition on wet cobblestones.  
*She, after administering a severe rebuke,  
prevailed with her Son to show mercy to the offender.*

Muted lights in the bishop's office, Bibles

and silver crosses in tall glass cases.

"I had commerce with the Devil to sway your mind,  
forgive me." A desk drawer slides shut,  
nails tap on the wood. "Leave your title and go,  
your devil has no place in this diocese."

"In the hallway I felt suddenly faint and dropped to the floor. She stood before me trailing robes colored in white of whitest heaven. The staff in her hand was burning away and flaking down in fading embers, red to grey to dead ash. 'Run, Theophilus, the Devil rules the Earth.' When I stood up the portraits all had thick cracks running from corner to corner. I ran. I ran into the street, I stumbled, I fell in a cloud of bus exhaust, and I got up and ran."

### St. Cecilia

In the mornings, Cecilia gathers her hair behind her head  
 with one hand and crosses herself with the other.  
 In the evening, she prays bowing down  
 until her forehead touches the cross on her floor.  
*But her father had other views, and gave her*  
*in marriage to a young patrician named Valerian.*  
 She kneels in a closet, icy white veil over her face,  
 wedding dress spread out in clean ruffles.  
 "Jesu, lover of my soul, let me  
 to thy bosom fly," she sings.  
 The door opens, "Cecilia, it's time."

"In the bedroom I shut my eyes and stood in stillness like a tree. His hands held me by the shoulders, his fingers had life and rubbed smooth and firm but my skin was insensate, dead, the vessel. 'I am not what you are,' I said. His eyes, huge, blue, captivated in an arrested lunge of his lips and body. 'I am already given to God. If you take what is His He will be angry.' I knew, I felt, I thought the skin of his hands had been the heat, the terrible grasp, the odor of slipping over skin and wet. 'Can't you see the angel, the one who stands beside me?' He dropped to his knees and clutched at the lowest trim of my dress. He pulled and lifted, something touched my thigh and sobbed. 'I can see him,' he said. 'He offers me roses and lilies wound in a crown if I resist, and a sword in my loins if I do not.'"

Faucet spotted with black stains.  
 Water runs over Cecilia's hands, the corner  
 of the square mirror is split away.  
 When something loud shakes the wall, she puts  
 an ear to the door, drops her nightgown to her ankles.  
 Voices, stick-smash on a table, Valerian,  
 "Yes, I am the man you seek, and I am a Christian."  
 Cecilia, her cheek sliding down the door,  
 fingers, grasping, then dropped.

"Dear Valerian, my husband whom I can't claim as my husband, I saw the hateful twist in the judge's face when you refused to reject the faith I taught you. They took you away and the last thing I saw were your hands bound limp together in rings of hard metal. I keep returning to the night you nearly touched me and my thigh that I never wanted to shudder. Can I go to God knowing that all I desire is the pulse of your wrist freed from the cuffs and pressed against me? They will empty the blood from your hands and all I can do is pray and tell them to take me too. They can choke me and slice my neck, but nothing can touch my body now, nothing can wound me more than your fingers falling from my thigh."

## St. Solangia

"I cherish a horrible dream. My eyes swing at the level of my hips and if I look up I see that I am carrying my own head, gripped by the roots of my hair. My legs wade through rivers, my skirt drips on grass. At times I think I can see how God sees, the open wound of my neck, pulsing with blood, through which He comes to animate my body with grace. I stop at an open grave where He drops me and nestles me in dirt. This is how I foresee the gift of His love."

*Her occupation was to mind her father's sheep  
as they grazed on the pasturages.*

The animals murmur when she digs her fingers  
into the tufts on their necks.

On the hill, she lies on her stomach  
and watches cloud-shadows drift over grass.

One road winds through the fields,  
one new car shining red.

A man gets out, washes his hands in river water.

When she whispers to the sheep,  
they stand and follow her.

"Even in my early years I knew, as I watched my father clipping away wool from a sheep's pink skin, that I would never admit the love of a man, only God's love high and brilliant, caressing me faintly with shadows. He gave me the gift of speaking to animals and understanding their voices and simple needs. At night, when the hour for prayer approaches, He has a star blaze whitely to guide us home where I kneel in straw before candles in a corner of the barn."

The car slows by the barbed wire  
where she leads them. He leans over, waves.

His leather coat, his sunglasses, his dark hair.

"I need help," he says. "Could I use your phone?"

She bids the sheep lie down,  
steps over bent wire, into his car.

"I've seen you," he says. "I've watched you."

"I've waited for the greatest of loves and meanwhile contented myself with the simple love walking beside me, but in a car I learned of the Devil's love. Its hands pinch quick and hard, its face angry and loud, its pressing, hairy and sharp pain. I slapped. I screamed. My fingernails found flesh to rake and my fingers found the door handle. I didn't know where to roll, I didn't know where the pain would take me, metal barb points pierced my skin and caught me. I spoke to my flock while he swore, told them to flee, but they could not listen, their eyes could not comprehend. He, with an axe, a scowl. I, an only one, waiting to seize upon my own hair, cool my sores in the river, find my rest in His bed."

### St. John the Silent

TV set loud, voices, anger, music.  
 The mother sits before it and changes channels.  
 Her young girl in the corner,  
 ripping clumps of hair from scalp,  
 yelling, "Christ has fucked me in the ass."  
 Men hold her against the wall, John,  
 dripping oil on his finger from a glass vial,  
 traces a cross on her forehead,  
 "Unclean spirit, leave this child."

"I was a bishop when I cast the demon out, but that night I started to dream of nasty things and woke up speaking obscenities against God. I bent my forehead to the floor in prayer, I cleansed my face and hands, I fell into sleep meditating upon the risen Christ, but nothing stopped the unholy words from my mouth. Foamy arms sliding, the thing large and vivid, horrible before me, pushed hard to suffocate me, my eyes demon eyes, my voice a demon voice, Him, holy ill-used Him beneath. I screamed to wake myself, cold air froze my sweat, a gleaming cross waited outside my window. I followed it to Jerusalem."

In the monastery courtyard,  
 bright sun bakes the old stones, slight wind  
 blows sand whips from the desert.  
 John in a cell, black bugs flit on the windowsill  
 where he clasps hands and gazes into the sky.  
*"On account of my many sins I have fled  
 and have sought out this desert to await the coming of the Lord."*  
 At night, a monk pauses, sounds of yelling  
 through the ceiling above.  
 He crosses himself and continues.

"The patriarch offered me priesthood, but when I spoke of my sins he shook his head and sent me back to my room. In this room is silence. Only the tiny insects and a wind that sometimes rustles through the wall. Here my bodily voice need not have commerce with anybody, only the voice of my soul that speaks directly to God. The sun blinds me when I open the shade. I squint at the white pain and pray for it to sear the obscene visions from my sight and leave me in the perfect silence of God."

### III

## ACCEPTANCE



### St. Sergius

"I remember being a young boy and knowing that my mother kept a book in her cupboard behind a stack of wooden bowls. Father took it out sometimes and they both pressed their hands together. Beyond the field of new green wheat shoots I wandered the forest, breaking hard brown cones against trees. An old man found me once. A beard of white hairs hanging to his stomach, worn winter boots and a brown robe. 'What is it you most desire?' he asked. I told him I wanted to be able to read the secret book. He handed me the heel of a bread-loaf from his pocket. It tasted sweet on my tongue, felt full in my stomach. At the table, I sat and read."

The soldier has a red star stitched on his cap.  
A table wobbles on uneven legs  
when he drops the Bible on it.  
The other man takes the woman by the arm  
and presses a pistol into her husband's back.  
In the tall yellow wheat that bends easily in the wind,  
young Sergius watches  
people pushed into the backs of covered trucks.  
Stalks whip his face. Heavy wheels leaving tread marks,  
his small voice, "The Lord is my shepherd . . ."

"They found a home for me in the village. They gave me a blade and taught me how to swing my arm to cut the wheat, but I wanted to keep to myself in the fir trees. One day I found a hut of straw collapsed around a robe of thick brown cloth and a Bible with yellowed pages and blurred ink. I waited, but the hermit never returned. The people began to know my name. Young men and women sat on my wood-slab bed where I stood and read, filling in words from my memory where the print had run away from seasons of snow and wet. 'Do you want to destroy us again?' they said. 'Don't you remember what happened before?' they said. 'Your God brings ruin. Take him away from us,' they said. This is not my Russia. My mother is a land that lies on the bosom of God and rests quiet, quiet in His embrace and His whispers."

*Sergius carried out his long-cherished  
plan of pursuing a solitary life.*

When the rocks freeze in the muddied earth  
and tree branches collect dripping icicles,  
Sergius squats in a hut of straw and branches,  
robe pulled over his head, tiny wisping fire.  
When the river swells and its banks grow green,  
he gather berries by its edge.  
Summer brings low planes overhead  
and carts borne hurriedly from the west.

"At the river I met a man in a uniform, his coat ripped, scratches on his cheek, a rifle butt dragging on the ground. I saw the star on his jacket and thought only of a burning house, my mother turning around and looking, a fist pulling her hair, wheat thrashing my eyes. He followed me into the forest. 'I know you,' he said. 'We grew up in the same village.' I tried to see only the sunlight separating through the tree leaves, thought of the forest land

as the Lord's table. 'I need your help,' he said. I faced him, only eyes and powder-black fingers twitching around the gun barrel. 'You were too young. You don't know. You weren't really there,' I said. He fell to his knees and became what I didn't think he could be. 'I need to be baptized. Please.'"

He cups cold river water in his hands,  
lets his fingers break over the soldier's forehead.  
He traces a cross on the skin and recites.  
The soldier takes his rifle when he stands again.  
"Stay here. You should not kill any longer."  
"They need me." Machine gun volleys  
and tank tracks. Billows of flame  
carry up burned chaff.

"I walked amongst the black husks of smoking timberwood, smelled the scorched wheat. People I had known lay in bloodied clothes. I put the soldier in a ditch and covered him as well as my hands would allow. But I still hated him, hated the rifle and the bullet in his skull. I hated him kneeling, begging eyes, the small voice answering. I will go among the people again to gather monks and begin my country here in the burnt patch where my mother's eyes searched for me, where those who would not know me ended their blood in the soil that bore me."

### St. Gregory the Wonderworker

"Jesus said we could wither fig trees if we had sufficient faith. As a child, I remembered these words when one night my dog fell sick. His head swayed and he stained the ground with foul smells. I held his ears gently, rubbed his fur and prayed as hard as I could, 'Be healed, please be healed.' I searched inside for faith while his small mouth trembled against my neck. Afterwards, I think God heard me cry as I squeezed the dirt in my fingers. He listened and He let love and blessings respond to the application of my hands."

Gregory at the podium, a squarish white shape  
with arms aloft. A whisper  
in the microphone, "Come unto me."  
Life moves in a wide band through aisles and rows  
in vast concrete space. Life with crooked legs,  
life with scarred eyes, useless arms, spreading sores.  
They fall before his hands, then rise straight,  
strong, clean, blinking at the floodlights.  
*He cured at the same time he wrought  
the conversion of their souls.*  
"So many, there are so many of you."

"I traveled in planes with a chorus of women singing blessed hymns. Every house was mine, and they filled every house I came to. I healed great numbers, forced evil spirits to emerge like steam out of people's souls. I awed unbelievers, turned war-hands to the work of Christ. I turned lakes into fields of dry hissing stones. I could remove a vast rock from the desert to the sea's shore. They see, they listen, they call me Moses, they know me."

Hill of grass, Gregory on his knees, praying,  
ranged in the vision of TV cameras, police guards.  
Wooden barriers hold the crowd back.  
"See how heaven showers down upon you."  
Stroke of light, a blinding sun.  
"For my Lord." Opening up, little red flashes.  
"For my grace." Floating, falling, overwhelming.  
"For my faith." Hands outstretched to catch dropping petals.  
"I offer this blessing for you."  
Screams, prayers, heels smashing rose petals into grass.

"An old man came and sat in my office. The hair on his chin was gray and sharp as spikes. He had a long, livid red scar on his forehead. He said, 'Jesus would not hurl himself from the heights for the devil's pleasure, yet you perform tricks to swell your own pride.' I told him I amazed the people's eyes to move their souls to God and healed their bodies so they could heal their faiths. He sat and felt the table's wood with his rough, wrinkled fingers. I held out my hand, 'Let me heal your wound, father.' But he pushed my arm away. 'Heal thyself,' he said."

The woman is young, hair tucked into a scarf.  
She walks up the empty church aisle, baby in arms.

Gregory at the altar, plain black suit, gray hair.  
She holds the baby out, "I remember you from TV,  
many years ago. Please help him."  
The baby's black eyes have no still focus, only vacancy.  
Gregory holds her hand, rubs her fingers in his.  
"I cannot, I promised God."

## St. Elizabeth

"I was born into the court and used to play rolling on thick rugs with my sisters. In front, the steps led into long hedges and rose bush clusters. One day I looked through the gate's twisting iron bars and saw a man in gray who had one shoulder hunched on a cane. He saw me, but I didn't look at his face, just watched the spiky yellow burrs stuck on his dirty trouser leg. They married me to a rich man. I built a hospital beside the road to my house and found Master Conrad for a tutor, who shows me how to be understood in the ways of God. My husband frowns and lets the meat go cold on the table waiting for my return from the sick-beds."

In the bedroom, Elizabeth dips a clean towel  
in a water basin and wrings it tight.

"Remove the veil," he says, running in.

She pulls back the sheer cloth from the bed.

A man is covered to the chin in thick scarlet,  
his face sallow, blotches on forehead and cheeks.

"You would bring a sick man into our own bed?"

"Who do you see," she says. "Look and tell me."

*Almighty God opened the eyes of his soul.*

*He saw the figure of Christ crucified.*

He takes the towel from her hand, cleans  
the waxen forehead. "Forgive me, please."

"I learned to love my husband as he learned to love my work of charity. But the heathen began to spread his fires in the holy land again and our Christian nations called for war. My husband could never forget his duty to God and kingdom. He donned his uniform and left to take command of a fighter wing. I waited and watched for reports. My sisters visited me, but I would always take my supper alone. Finally a man in a uniform came to my door. He returned nothing of my husband, only a spot on a map, coordinates, a flight path. I nodded repeatedly and thanked him. When he left I sat on the carpet, dug my fingers into its deep dyed fibers and wept."

Two women lift a black cloak to Elizabeth's shoulders.

Master Conrad waits for her to kneel.

"You will listen only to me, nothing you knew  
will be a part of you anymore." She nods.

His is the heavy rod, the cheek-slap,  
the keys on a thick brass ring, tiny windows  
letting in nothing but a little light.

When she clutches a statue's smooth wood legs,  
he stands over her and whispers in her ear,

"Forget, forget everything but God."

In her chamber, she weeps, a stone bowl  
half-filled with dry, crumbled porridge.

*"If I am so afraid of a mortal man, how awe-inspiring  
must be the Lord and Judge of this world."*

"Master Conrad kept the doors tight so not even my sisters could see me. Nor would he

let me visit the stone marking my husband's place. He tells me that God is jealous of any love I spare for another, but my memory is fallible. My dear husband asked me to forgive him and cried at my bosom. We let the sick man rest and walked out into the garden where he picked a flower of every color for me and told me he only wanted to be loved the way he cherished me. I still see him on a bench holding my hands, staring at the limp petals in my lap, and I see him in his uniform, breaking into flame, steel splitting in shards, floating to burned earth. I can only be for You, God, but I can't forget the man who lay beside me, and I can't forget his dying for You. The sick man I tended didn't stay long. His arms thinned and he coughed a little before he died."

Only Conrad kneels by the hospital bed,  
clasping Elizabeth's small hand. Her eyes  
are shut, her lips dry and pale.  
"Have I succeeded, my lady?" His cheeks  
are packs of wrinkles.  
"I go to join him in a ball of flame."  
He drops his forehead to her arm.  
"I have failed you," he says.

### St. Mariana of Quito

"I was a little girl crouching in the dry stone fountain where pigeons came to perch. People had gathered in the square outside the cathedral for Good Friday and I watched the penitents performing their rituals. An old woman striking her shoulders with a branch, a man swinging a stone-filled stocking around his sides. Another man sat on his knees with a thick black whip embedded with shards of glass. I saw welts and cuts open on his naked back, sweat-slicked brown, tense. The pigeons overhead shook their wings and scratched at the stone. A woman collapsed, moaning. A man crawling, huge wooden beam on his shoulder. Someone praying, loud, frantic. In the gravel and trash I found a rock and rubbed its harsh edge on my arm until I bled. I felt the bed shake when they held me down."

*Her relations proposed placing her  
in a convent to try her vocation.*

The road follows hill-curves and valleys.  
Mariana stares out the bus window,  
suitcase at her feet, shawl wrapped in lap.  
Occasional white crosses on the roadside.  
Windshield breaks against a bird, driver's arms up,  
brake scream, plunge, wheel spin,  
glass cracking, bleeding oil on green.

"My body tossing against seats, flying dust and spinning in my eyes. I saw the bird and white wings suspended for a moment in the glass that opened up in huge wedges, and as I lay with warm blood smell in my face I could feel the bird's death, sputtering wings, tiny squawks, diminishing. Its breath did not desist before I heard, low, whispering under human moans, 'Do not leave Quito. Remain. Wait.' I don't know what He requires of me. I only know dreams of the snow-topped mountains shuddering, cathedral towers toppling, arms and legs caught under walls, my face dying under stone, I wake screaming and grab the bed legs to feel them steady on the floor. I do everything I can to keep the dream from emerging."

Friday nights, Mariana holds her arms  
tight against her sides in a crude wooden coffin.  
In the square where browned women with huge gold necklaces  
sell rosaries and crucifixes,  
Mariana winds dried rose stems around her forehead  
and bends to beat her head against the cobblestones.  
Cross-legged, on an aluminum sheet,  
sweating, still, silver bright reflected sun,  
she holds a water glass to her lips,  
takes it away, then again, just at lips.

"I lived in a room on a hillside where I could see my city below, burning in orange lights under fog at night, brown amongst exhaust-haze in the daylight. I went to mass every morning and prayed for the sinners drunk in the clubrooms or fornicating in hour hotels at the city's edge. On the final day I knelt in the pew when the floor started to twitch. I stood up, altar statues all framed in thin gold, all shaking, my Lord on the cross, His

bloodied knees, Mary Queen of Heaven, and the dove above them all. People clutching the pillars, crouching in chapel spaces. I ran up the steps, 'I offer myself.' Faces cut on glass, seats unmoored, why this, why sirens, why lives forced out of place for a voice. Only when I opened my arms, when the Holy Spirit broke free and brought its rubble and beams upon me, when I fell with the snapping of my bones, only then did the earth stop shaking."



### St. Teresa

The ball stops at the curb. Young Teresa  
 runs to pick it up. Long hair, flower dress.  
 The sitting man in the wool cap  
 blows frosty puffs into his hands.  
 She offers a coin.  
 "You're just a child, please keep your money."  
 Spray paint in the elevator, broken hallway bulbs.  
 Piece of cake snatched from counter.  
 She holds it in the street as the man walks away,  
 one leg dragging. She doesn't call him.  
*"I will pray for that poor man on my first communion day."*

"This was the hour of my conversion. I awoke to a ceaseless crying and found an infant on my floor waving its arms. I picked him up, held him to my breast and swayed him gently from side to side. He wailed and clutched at my nightdress with small fists. I unbuttoned and he sucked milk that I didn't imagine would be inside for him, but his fierce lips clung to his fulfillment. He fell asleep on my bed with His arms stretched out on the sheet and I saw for the first time the scars on His palms. At the bedside, I knelt and bowed my head. When I looked away He was gone. The Lord had come to me, made Himself tiny and struggling just so I could have strength for Him and feel the nourishing spirit swell inside me. Now when I pray I forget the liturgies and words I've been taught and pray just as I did when I was a young girl shivering in the nightlight's pink hue, 'I pray that I be happy, that my mother and father and my sister be happy, and the world be a happy place.'"

Teresa's mother over the phone,  
 "Can't you please come home and try to talk to him?"  
 Her father grunts and smashes  
 planter pots on the kitchen counter.  
 He flings roots and dirt. Teresa, arms crossed,  
 watching from the hall. "Don't, father, don't."  
 Gold cross necklace ripped by a grubby fist.  
 Curled on the floor, weeping, rubbing  
 dirt into the tile fissures. "Teresa,  
 I've never known you. Who are you, child?"

"My father was caught trying to kiss a young girl at a bus bench and my mother finally consented to have him sent away. I wouldn't talk to him, couldn't look at his pain, his whimpers, my disgust. My mother and sister helped him out into the arms of tall men. Once the door shut I picked up my suitcase and returned to school. I click the heater off and sleep on the floor without blankets even when frost whitens the window glass. I only want a divine love that clings as fiercely as suffering, the taste of offered cake as lasting as the cold that coils around my spine."

In the small room without a bed,  
 a rosary hangs from a nail,  
 stacked books fill the corners,

Teresa sits cross-legged,  
long straight hair wound tight down her back.  
Her sister stands just inside the doorway.  
"Three years. You haven't seen him once."  
Teresa lowers her head, flips a page.  
"I pray for him every night. Do you?"

"I wanted my life to be a journey, a long weary time ending in a divine ascent, but I only found a pale depth of screaming sounds. One night I dreamt the infant who had appeared to me had grown into the strength of my Lord standing beside me. My hand offered into His, my eyes given to His smile, He showed me the mountain of love, but when I started for the cloudy height He shook His head and led me into a cave ringed with grass clumps. The tunnel was so dark that only His eyes shone, guiding me over crags, under dripping cold water. 'This is your way to Love,' He told me."

Waiting room sofa, passing nurse wheeling  
metal cart, clock behind metal bars.  
Pale hospital sleeves, his chin  
dropped to his chest, "I don't  
understand, I don't."  
"Father, father, it's okay, I'm here."  
His large hands, red skin, green veins,  
held in her long fingers.

### St. Benedict the Black

The river at night slides huge and dark.  
 Benedict on the grass, skipping stones,  
 watching spotlit barges pulled by the oily flow.  
 Car with fins, slowing on the road.  
 Bottle hits his shoulder. Window cranked down,  
 two faces. "Out of the way, nigger." Laughter.  
 The man on the bus stop bench whispers,  
*"You make fun of this poor black man now,  
 but ere long you will hear great things of him."*  
 Once the car leaves, he crosses the street,  
 touches the fist holding the bottleneck.  
 "Come with me."

"A word struck me. I wanted to flee my skin and let the river consume my body, wanted to tear a mouth from a grinning skull with jagged glass, wanted to know why my God had stamped me and blotted my soul among all other men. Since my childhood I've been able to know people's hearts just as I can see their faces, and when I looked at the two men I saw myself the way they did, a field of black, unchanging and formless, no face, no eyes, no light within. The other man smiled. I saw only red tail lights when he took my hand. I followed him, and when I peered through his eyes I found a black disc ringed with gold circles floating on white. I followed him to his church. He told me all were accepted in those rooms, so I took refuge within."

Benedict scoops mounds of potato  
 out of a steel pot and piles them on plates.  
 In lean clothes and stubble faces,  
 they gather at his counter, watching  
 piles of smeared white. Some kneel.  
*Food seemed to multiply miraculously under his hands.*  
 The man in the collar in the doorway  
 sees and frowns.

"In the corner where my face sweats from the hot stews, the priest came to me and said my presence was causing too many disturbances. He looked at me through rectangular glasses and told me I should leave. I saw through his view an inkblot with black spikes stretching out and threatening over a field of perfect white. People followed me when I left. We built our chapel by the river. Before the morning sermon I sometimes stand at the window and watch the branches and refuse the river bears in its muddy palms. I know that my name is emerging among them. They call me 'The Holy Black' and come to me with their ills and needs. I know that I am hated by some in the street, and I feel that I want to drown."

Policemen in jackets fill out reports.  
 In red beating light a woman cries.  
 Flash pictures snapped  
 of the scorched cross stuck in the grass.  
 Smoking soot patches on church walls,

broken glass, collapsed roof.  
Where the water laps up on the weeds,  
Benedict kneels, his fist in the river,  
shaking. "Show me what You see,  
my God, please, please show me."

"Smoke in my throat, odor of smoke in my nose, black of smoke on my hands, I wept at the water's edge and after I closed my eyes I slipped in. I fought myself, my arms that flailed to keep afloat, my head pushing up over the waves, my mouth spitting dirt. And finally I saw what only He could see, my face and all other faces He gathers in one sight, a wide blue ocean, everywhere it could be, and flame billowing hot, red, yellow, arching around flame, all together, all none but the same before Him. On the bank where I pulled myself out my eyes flashed from wave to fire, and I kept laughing."

## St. Keyne

From the window, Keyne sees orange lights  
 on raw coal conveyors  
 that rumble through the night.  
 Footsteps in the hall. She ladles  
 thin brown stew into a bowl.  
 Her brother comes in unwrapping a long scarf,  
 cheeks smudged, shiny black. He speaks.  
 She wipes stew splashes from stove top.

"I've never seen the land without black, scooped-out coal pits. As a young girl I used to play in the yards where trains filled the air with smoke and bore away compacted piles in overflowing cars. I threw stones and skipped through spots of hard yellow grass. Once I tripped and fell into an open pit, sliding over hard coal lumps, stopping with my palms flat on black powder. Before I could stand, or open my bruised eyes, or lift my face, I felt the Devil's hands grip my ankles and try to pull me through into his underground world of charcoal tunnels and pulley devices pumped with steam and whirling electric to rend limbs from bodies. I screamed, heard him growl, felt the sharp press of his claws. I screamed until the flashlights peering over the edge forced his arms back into the dense below. My brother brought me water and read to me as I lived with scraped shins and raw knuckles."

Keyne wraps herself in a blanket,  
 lies in the coal bed, digs under the pile,  
 concealed. Train wheels start.  
 Later, peering out, stone sheep paddocks  
 in rows, deep green fields, blue water  
 beaten into foam on the shore, all passing.  
 At the refinery, she jumps and runs,  
 floodlights, coveralled men working knobbed levers.  
 At the stone cross with sun circle on a hill,  
 she drops and prays.

"By the river I found an everywhere green of trees in a circle and sunlight slanting between them in white stakes. I sleep in a room in the village, write to my brother, mend things at night, but in the day I live in the grove and rehearse for my walks in a garden that awaits me. The snakes often emerge from their holes, swarm about the trees and bite my legs. They try to frighten me away with white slime stomachs and green-blue backs stretching, quick sharp wounds in my skin. I pray at the river, rub its cool clear on the blood marks and watch them fade into perfect flesh. I stand with eyes shut when they tangle in the grass. I am not what can be moved by the Devil's whipping tails, I am myself who looks into sky and forgets with a voice the thing pulling a vile belly over my toes, 'I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.'"

He finds a dress rolled under a thick tree root,  
 and Keyne spinning in the grove, grass stains  
 on her bare hips and back, hair straight, red.  
 His eyes lowered, fist offering dress,

"Put your clothes on. What's wrong with you?"

Her head tilted, her knuckles  
against his pink freckled cheek.

"Wash your face. You should wash it," she says.

Her arms out, legs together, "I conquered  
the snakes. I turned them to stone."

He picks up a long smooth rock.

*For the stones in the fields and the villages there  
have the form of serpents.*

"I led my brother to the river to clean the dark smudges he couldn't see. 'Come home again,' he said. I shook my head, gathered water on my fingers. No more of cooking bad smells in choking air while the black dust settles on clothes, skin, rooftops, spines of leaves. I rubbed his face but the smeared dark had become part of him. He tried to pity me with his eyes and offer strength with his hands around mine. The angel whose coming left leaves flurrying in her wake set me in light the trees could not block, her hair thick like wild weeds, her eyes like the river running dark, restless. 'No garden,' she said, 'Not here. Not ever.' She dug her fingers into the ground and pulled away a thick fruit skin of grass and soil to show me black chunks layered beneath. She flicked the river away from its steaming black bed. When I looked at my brother again his cheeks were white, smooth as a child's. 'We can go home now,' I said."

### St. Paul the Hermit

"Father couldn't control the car. On a cool blue morning his large-boned hands jerked the wheel when we drifted off the road. I slept into a dream of an old gray cloak fluttering down from hard white crystal stars, falling through the easy breeze onto my shoulders. I awoke to the creaking of the car's dead metal. I had to crawl on glass and push my mother's arm away. My legs stinging, my face warm, I stood up. The desert, undefined, brown, blurring into a band of heat on the horizon. I wanted to be in that stillness, glancing just a moment at a gray strip and a metal spot flipping over. They offered me an inheritance and a grandfather's care, but I walked in the other direction."

*Relishing the sweets of solitude and heavenly contemplation,  
he resolved to return no more.*

Old mining cave, blocked with plywood.  
Hole broken in the boards, big enough for crawling.  
Tentative patch of grass and dusty brown bushes.  
Single tree, nests of bunched leaves opening  
with small buds of fruit. Paul, blackened feet,  
shirt-sleeves hanging in shreds,  
a face in white hair tufts. He bends  
to gather water in cupped hands from the spring.

"A dark vacant space waited for me to find and make my home, and God bored a shaft to water my lips and feed fruit for me. I spend most of the day in prayer and when I reach the end I pause before the final word, letting the life of the liturgy open inside me, like parting of pages, ink into focus, molding into solidity within, until I hear the voice the way only emptiness of body can bring it upon me, then, finally, I gasp, 'Amen.' Sometimes I see a man walking out of the blur, a man like me, old, gray-haired, skin hardened to heat. If I close my eyes and search I can see him bending in a room of candle points, a bishop before him in rich red placing a cloak around his shoulders."

Knock on the boards, Paul's voice welcoming,  
the man in loose white clothes and sandals.  
"Somehow I know your name, Antony."  
Smiles, an embrace, both sitting cross-legged  
by the spring. Antony pulls  
a full round loaf from his sack.  
"Please break first. You're my elder," says Antony.  
"No, you're my guest," says Paul.

"I studied the ridges and white flour coating on the bread in his hand and found nothing but vanity in our talk. We held it together and broke at the same time. He wet his lips with spring water after the first mouthful. 'Does the world still suffer sins of pride?' I asked. 'Do they still hate and tear at each other?' I asked. 'Do they still covet the wealth of metal over the riches of the soul?' He nodded slowly each time. We rubbed the crumbs from our hands and kept talking. I told him I knew Him as an unfolding Word, and he spoke of being clutched in His arms. I laughed, I wondered, I listened for every detail of sound and touch. We prayed together until we felt like sleep. Sometimes I stopped just to hear the sweetness of words from his mouth. 'You forgot your cloak. You have

to bring it to me,' I said. He agreed, without asking, but not without understanding. Then we went inside to sleep."

Late evening of another day when Antony  
raps on the wood again.  
Single candle, dripping over stones,  
Paul flat on back, arms crossed over breast.  
Antony crouches to the mouth, hears  
breath long and faint. Sand in gray whiskers.  
He tucks the cloak under the chin,  
covers elbows, down to knees,  
sits and prays.

"I only woke once, only to feel my hand held in his, squeezed for a calm moment before he left for the cloak. I kept that touch with me as I waited for my ponderous heart to stop. I have hollowed out my body and freed the space around me so You would grant me grace, knowledge of Your Word and sense of Your Spirit, but I never imagined this other gift, the grip of another's flesh kept with me in the final hours, knowing he is one like me and we need not fear even when we are not in solitude. I held on until the dream of the gray cloak falling through clouds, animated, light wings, upon me, then silence in my bones."



## St. Antony, Part II

"I grew old living in a desert shack, feeding only on bread a disciple dropped at my door. He bundled notes with the loaves, wrote that stories were told about me, people wanted to join me and live as I did. Once when he came I got into the truck beside him. As he started the motor I thought I heard a voice whispering a prayer and a splash that made me imagine fruit falling on water. And when we reached the paved road I looked back at the wilderness of silent hills, rocks and cactus. 'I will come back to you,' I said. 'But first I must gather others.'"

Scissors cutting away  
long hair and beard curls,  
black streaks inside a bathtub.  
Diner on the main road, dirt lot,  
dust on an old neon sign.  
Antony sitting in new clothes,  
waitress, gloss lips, "What would you like?"  
"I've come to collect souls."  
Young man on a bar stool turns to watch,  
denim jacket, fork held over a plate.

"I sent my other disciple on a mission in the city and brought Macarius with me. Together we followed the road and filled men's ears with talk of the purity of God in the barren places. When I found enough we built our home on a hill in the desert. I spend most of my hours in a solitary room in the attic, seeing no one but my beloved Macarius. When I open my window and the dry air smells of bitter cactus and hot stones, I can sometimes feel the presence of another, one who has lived here longer than I have in complete isolation. Once I dreamt that the firm desert earth had turned to lakes of swampish sand swallowing the monastery's wood walls and my brethren within. I felt my legs slipping in shapeless dirt, I clutched at sinking bushes and cried, 'Lord, how can we be saved?' The vast pool trembling with a voice, a word in my ears before they drown. 'Humility.'"

Antony presses his face close  
to the inner side of a car window,  
stares at the high towers, steel, glass.  
The cathedral, rows of candles in wrought-iron racks,  
chorus girls in white, voices piping.  
Antony bends to one knee, the bishop  
gathers a thick gray cloak around his neck,  
fastens the collar. "For you, who have served  
God in the wilderness longer than anyone."  
Antony shuts his eyes, winces  
at the high shriek of an organ note.

"Sometimes I can't fight his image or his voice in my mind, muttering long prayers, often sobbing at the same time, screaming at nothing but the fruit plucked from his tree. Once, I ran down the hillside, stumbled in dirt and pebbles, met a man on a blaze-red machine waiting in leather chaps and black beard. 'I know about the other one,' he said. 'I know he wounds your pride.' I noticed his dark eyes swimming in blood. 'I know where he is. I

can talk him into fleeing your domain. Just ask for my help. Just ask.' I smiled. 'I thought we had ended this already,' I said. I crossed myself, watched the twitch in his eyelids. 'Show the way, then never return to me, Satan.' A gloved hand he couldn't seem to control, finger, straight pointing, grease smell as his engine started, gray smoke and a long tire track. I packed bread, journeyed for a day and found him in a cave, eyes smiling in wrinkled face. He called himself Paul and said he had dreamt of me also. I knew why he asked for my cloak, and I only left so I could bring it to him."

Small cell of wood, candle stubs  
in wax-coated brass holders.

Antony lifts the cloak off a nail in the wall,  
holds it to his breast, feels the fabric.

Macarius in the hallway, white robe.

"Where are you taking it?"

"A pure man needs this more than a sinner."

*He returned with it in all haste,  
fearing lest the hermit might be dead.*

"Last night, dear Paul, I touched you as you lay sleeping, tucking my fingers under your frayed waistband, clutching your warm secret flesh. You didn't firm against my palm and I found it funny, two aged men too old for sinful responses. Then I gripped your hand a final time. I returned to wrap you and wait with you. When you died I placed you in the deepest tight corner of your cave and left your tomb. Only the desert could be so dark at night, not even the ground exists unless I step upon it. All I have is what I felt at a single touch, and now a loss, a memory, a love denied. But in the icy bright stars I know a broader pain drifts, my Lord who knows the absence of billions of souls. Each empty moment is Yours. Every distance from Your desperate loves. I do not rest until I see the lamps of my home, tentative over the dark land."

## APPENDIX

At the request of some readers of these poems, I include this list, which briefly describes the original stories of these saints and offers some notes on the spiritual issues explored in the poems. Donald Attwater and Herbert Thurston's edition of Butler's Lives of the Saints (4 vols. [New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1963]) is the primary source for these poems, and italicized lines are direct quotations from this text. Names are listed as they appear in Butler, and I include feast dates because most hagiographers use them as an ordering scheme.

St. Genesius the Comedian, August 25.

An actor who, for the amusement of the Emperor Diocletian, burlesqued the ritual of Christian baptism. However, during the performance, the parody of ritual became spiritual reality as he was seized by divine inspiration and was converted in the midst of his blasphemy.

St. Mary of Egypt, April 2.

At the age of twelve, Mary left home and became a prostitute in Alexandria. Out of curiosity, she followed a group of pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem (corrupting some of them on the journey), but she understood her sinfulness when an "invisible force" prevented her from entering a church. At the commandment of Our Lady, she lived in the desert for forty-seven years. She had not been properly educated in Christian ritual, and one can imagine her forming her own image of God like Browning's Caliban.

St. Barontius, March 25.

Prior to retiring to an abbey, Barontius gave away all his property but kept some of it

in secret. He learned of the gravity of his sin during a vision of an assault by demons, a heavenly trial, and a journey from Hell to Purgatory.

St. John Gualbert, July 12.

After his only brother was murdered, John considered it a matter of honor to take revenge, but once he confronted the killer, he remembered Christ praying for His murderers. He followed Christ's example, forgave the spiritually ignorant murderer and entered the monastery of San Miniato.

St. Dorothy, February 6.

Sentenced to die because she refused to worship idols or marry, Dorothy was jeered on her way to execution by a man named Theophilus, who mockingly asked her to send him fruits from the garden she was going to. Dorothy did as he requested, and the young man was converted after a taste of the heavenly fruit.

SS. Vitus and Modestus, June 15.

Baptized without his parents' knowledge, young Vitus fled home along with his tutor, Modestus. An angel guided their boat, and an eagle brought them food. After capture, Vitus miraculously survived immersion in molten lead and exposure to a lion. Both died after torture. Matthew 10:35: "For I am come to set a man at variance against his father."

St. Amator, May 1.

St. Amator and his wife Martha were converted when the bishop who married them read the blessing for the ordination of deacons instead of the nuptial blessing. Martha

entered a convent and St. Amator became a bishop. Germanus, the young governor of Auxerre, came into conflict with Amator because he insisted upon preserving a certain pagan ritual. When it came time to choose a successor, Amator realized, "by revelation or intuition," that Germanus was the man. Germanus was seized in the cathedral, stripped of his clothes and pronounced bishop. My version makes Germanus into Martha's brother and turns the conversion into a violent scene which questions the sincerity of the act.

St. Clare, August 12.

A bishop presented young Clare with a branch on Palm Sunday. That night, she ran away from home and joined the brethren of St. Francis. She was eventually appointed superior of her own nunnery. At times she came into conflict with the brethren of St. Francis as she continually defended the role of women in the Church.

St. Colette, March 6.

St. Colette set up a small hermitage in the order originally founded by St. Clare. She had a vision of St. Francis ordering her to restore the rule of St. Clare to the severity it had lost in the intervening years. She hesitated and was punished for valuing the aesthetic over the spiritual by being struck blind for three days and dumb for another three.

St. Theodora of Alexandria, September 11.

Gregory, the prefect of Egypt, had a wife St. Theodora who fled home after committing a grave sin. She lived in a monastery of the Thebaid disguised as a man. While on an errand in Alexandria she was recognized by her husband, but she insisted on returning to the desert, perhaps upset by her husband as an embodiment of her sin.

St. Christopher, July 25.

Christopher decided he wanted to serve the greatest man in the world. He went from a great king to the Devil but eventually found Christ while working as a bearer of travelers across a river. He then went to Lycia to perform conversions and was eventually beheaded. In my version, God only accepts Christopher upon his martyrdom.

St. Barbara, December 4.

A rich paynim had a daughter named Barbara who, although princes came to request her hand in marriage, maintained that she would stay celibate. When her father left for a time, Barbara lived as an ascetic in a bath-house on her father's estate. He returned and, enraged by her activities in his absence, took her to a mountaintop to kill her.

St. Anastasius the Persian, January 22.

Anastasius was impressed by the courage of the martyrs depicted in churches in Europe. Obsessed by the need to give his life for Christ, he returned to a Persian city and was arrested once he confessed his faith. The governor informed him that the king would release him if only Anastasius would renounce the Christian faith by word of mouth, but for the Christian, word, deed, and identity are one.

St. Theodosia, May 29.

The Roman Emperor Leo ordered a ban on the public veneration of sacred images. When an official attempted to remove a particularly revered image of our Lord, Theodosia led a band of women who knocked down the ladder supporting the man and killed him. She was tortured and executed in prison. Her crime makes her an odd choice for canonization, but I suggest an association with the good thief of the Gospel.

The Martyrs of Japan I (called the Nagasaki Martyrs in other sources), February 5.

Twenty-six Christians were crucified after a Spanish captain boasted that missionary activity facilitated the conquest of Japan by the West. Among them were a soldier and native Japanese boys who served at Mass.

St. Gummarus, October 11.

St. Gummarus was married to a woman of good birth named Guinimaria, who tormented him by being "extravagant and perverse in her ways, cruel, capricious, and altogether unteachable." He served for eight years in a foreign war and returned to find that Guinimaria had thrown the house into chaos. She was so moved by his patience that she seemed to repent her behavior. However, she proved to be untrustworthy and returned to her old ways, suggesting that Christian forgiveness can carry a heavy price.

St. Eutropius, April 30.

Eutropius was banished by the inhabitants of Saintes, France while on an evangelical mission. He lived on a rock outside of town and preached to anyone who would come to listen, including the Roman governor's daughter, Eustella. The governor had him killed when he discovered the man's influence on his daughter. I have seized upon the possibility that more tenderness existed between the two than is suggested in the hagiography.

St. Rita of Cascia, May 22.

For eighteen years, St. Rita tolerated a marriage to a brutal, violent man. After he was killed in a vendetta, Rita tried to enter the convent at Cascia and was only admitted after much begging. Her superior tested her by ordering her to water a dead vine stump. During a sermon on the crown of thorns, Rita fell into ecstasy and seemed to be wounded

by a thorn. On her deathbed, she requested a rose, which was found on a bush that should not have yielded any in that season and which served as a symbol of resurrection from a life of suffering.

St. Thalelaeus the Hermit, February 27.

Surnamed Epiklauros, "weeping much," Thalelaeus built himself a cage next to a heathen temple and converted many. When questioned, he replied, "I punish my criminal body that God, seeing my affliction for my sins, may be moved to forgive them and to deliver me from the torments of the world to come, or at least to mitigate their severity."

St. Antony the Abbot, January 17.

After giving his inheritance to the poor, Antony retired to live as a hermit. The Devil then appeared to harass him. The temptation of St. Antony is a popular subject for art. In an engraving by Jacques Callot, the saint is surrounded by demons who anally penetrate each other with various objects, suggesting a homoerotic element to the temptations. Eventually, Antony overcame the Devil's assaults and came out of isolation to found monasteries.

The Martyrs of North America, September 26.

Readings of missionary journeys to less technologically advanced cultures often reveal an odd mixture of contempt and concern in the character of the missionaries. John de Brebeuf impressed the Hurons by bringing rain to save their crops. Antony Daniel died pierced by arrows during an Iroquois attack on a Huron village. Rene Goupil was tomahawked after making the sign of the cross on a child's brow. Noel Chabanel did not possess the survival skills of the rest and had a difficult time adjusting to the Native



American way of life. Gabriel Lalemant was tortured to death by the Iroquois. Charles Garnier baptized dying Hurons during an Iroquois attack. Isaac Jogues was tortured by the Mohawks but was freed and was given special permission by Pope Urban VIII to celebrate Mass with his mutilated fingers.

St. Humphrey, March 8.

After he was elected bishop, Humphrey's diocese was invaded by Northmen, forcing him to flee for his life. He wished to retire to a monastery, but the pope counseled him to return to his charge and gather his flock. Humphrey did return and helped the people rebuild their homes after the invasions ended. In this version, God is more forgiving than Humphrey is to himself.

St. Clarus, November 4.

Clarus settled near Rouen, France to teach religion. A woman of rank and privilege had him killed after he rejected her sexual advances. The often desperate preservation of celibacy is a common theme in the hagiographies.

St. Mary Francis of Naples, October 6.

Mary Francis's father beat her and locked her in her room after she announced she would give herself to Christ instead of to marriage. Her mother intervened and Mary received the habit in the Franciscan church. She was a prophet who foresaw many of the excesses of the coming French Revolution, and the dead, including her father, often appeared to her asking for special prayers on their behalf. In this version, her sacrifices are an attempt to quell an internal pain.

St. Bernadette, April 16. Also, the Appearing of Our Lady at Lourdes, February 11.

Fourteen-year-old Bernadette witnessed an apparition of the Lady in a grotto. She returned a number of times to the same place, and, as word got out, more and more people came with her to see her respond to the vision. The attention heaped upon the girl became more martyrdom than fame, and she was taken to a convent for safety, but even the sister who took special charge of her would permit visitors for interviews.

St. Theophilus the Penitent, February 4.

An early version of the Faust story. An earnest church administrator, Theophilus was deposed by a new bishop. He made a pact with the Devil, who, after receiving Theophilus' renunciation of Christ and Mother Mary, influenced the bishop to reverse his decision. However, the saint could not rest with his sin and eventually reconciled himself with Christ after a forty days' penance in the church of our Lady. The story hints at corruption within the Church.

St. Cecilia, November 22.

Cecilia decided at an early age to maintain her virginity for God, but her father married her to a man named Valerian. On their wedding night, Cecilia told her husband an angel watched over her who would harm him if he violated her celibacy. Valerian subsequently accepted baptism. Valerian was martyred by a Roman prefect; Cecilia suffered the same fate, but not before she buried her husband. I cannot help but wonder if some part of Cecilia regretted the outcome of the wedding night.

St. Solangia, May 10.

Solangia took a vow of chastity at an early age and tended sheep at her father's farm.

Bernard, a son of the count of Poitiers, attempted to carry her away on his horse. She resisted and fell off. Bernard cut off her head, and legend relates her body picked up the head and carried it to the cemetery of the church of Saint-Martin-du-Cros. My version sets up the miracle as Solangia's prophecy of her death.

St. John the Silent, May 13.

John was consecrated a bishop of Armenia at an early age. However, "his inability to remedy certain evils" prompted him to retire to Jerusalem where a floating cross led him to the monastery of St. Sabas. His life experience taught him "that a soul accustomed to speak to God alone finds only bitterness and emptiness in worldly intercourse." A witness describes how St. John exorcized an evil spirit by making the sign of the cross with oil on a child's forehead. Nietzsche wrote in Beyond Good and Evil: "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster."

St. Sergius of Radonezh, September 25.

Sergius's family had been forced out of their home by the growing military might of the principality of Moscow. After some time in solitude, he founded a flourishing monastery. Before going into battle against the Tartars, Prince Dmitry of Moscow came to him for a blessing. In my version, I imagine a Sergius not as easily reconciled with militarism.

St. Gregory the Wonderworker, November 17.

God blessed the bishop Gregory with the power to work miracles, which he used not only for healing but also for the sake of spectacles. In "The Grand Inquisitor" chapter of Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, the inquisitor confronts Jesus on the third

temptation in the wilderness: "Thou wouldst not enslave man by a miracle, and didst crave faith freely, not based by miracles."

St. Elizabeth of Hungary, November 19.

Born to King Andrew II of Hungary, Elizabeth was married to the Landgrave Ludwig. She used her wealth to care for the sick and poor; eventually even her husband converted to her charitable beliefs. Ludwig died during a crusade, and Elizabeth became a nun in the order of St. Francis. One Master Conrad, noted as a successful inquisitor of heretics, took it upon himself to "direct" Elizabeth, a process which at times involved physical punishment. Conrad apparently "wished her to cling to God alone," but one wonders how he could compel Elizabeth to truly forget her loved ones.

St. Mariana of Quito, May 26.

At a young age, St. Mariana's relatives tried to place her in a convent where she could practice her natural devotion to God. However, "some special interposition of Providence" kept her in the city. A series of devastating earthquakes hit Quito in 1645, which ceased after Mariana offered herself as a sacrifice for the sins of her city. The earthquakes stopped, but Mariana became ill and died. In my version, the notion of sacrifice is not an easy one for the saint to accept.

St. Teresa of Lisieux, October 3.

Teresa practiced charity at an early age when she tried to give a coin to a beggar who refused it. She describes her conversion as a vision of Jesus as a newly born infant. While she lived as a Carmelite nun, her father lost his mind and was sent to an asylum for three years; Teresa referred to this period as "my father's martyrdom." She also received a

vision of being led by Jesus to the mountain of Love by a subterranean way, suggesting that not all can walk the same path to Divine Love.

St. Benedict the Black, April 4.

Born into a family of African slaves near Messina, Sicily, Benedict was set free by his master. A young hermit named Lanzi observed Benedict insulted because of his race and invited the young man to join the hermit community. Benedict worked as a cook but was eventually appointed vicar of a convent. Among his miraculous powers, he could multiply food and read thoughts. In this version, the latter ability lets him see both the bigotry in men's hearts and God's vision of the unity of all people.

St. Keyne, October 8.

Keyne left her home to live in a forest that was infested with snakes. She turned the snakes to stone and was persuaded to return to her home by her nephew (her brother in my version). She learns that no paradisiacal garden exists in this world and finally reconciles herself with the human community.

St. Paul the Hermit, January 15.

Paul lived in solitude in a cave after losing his parents at the age of fifteen. St. Paul's hagiography also relates his meeting with the hermit St. Antony, who sought him out at the age of ninety after being tempted by pride in thinking that no one had served God in the desert as long as he had and realizing his error in a vision. The two met at Paul's cave just as the latter was ready for death. He asked Antony to fetch the cloak that the Bishop of Alexandria had given him so Paul could be buried in it. In my version, human contact becomes Paul's final gift before death.